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The CAR and the LADY

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THE CAR AND THE LADY

THE CAR AND THE LADY

BY

PERCY F. MEGARGEL

AND

GRACE SARTWELL MASON

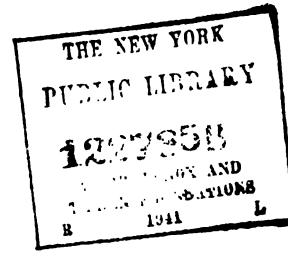
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FOREWORD

THE true history of a transcontinental automobile race underlies nearly every detail of the following story. It is a romance seen through the log-book of an actual journey. Hence the particulars of equipment and the description of difficulties met and overcome. The authors hope that, with the progress of good highways across this fascinating continent of ours, more motorists may feel the lure of the American road. If this class of traveler finds in "The Car and the Lady" a timely word which will make the way easier they will feel that they have been justified in supplementing the purely romantic interest of their story with wisdom gained in the school of experience.

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THE CAR AND THE LADY

THE CAR AND THE LADY

The Car and the Lady

CHAPTER I

AT a wide front window of the Albright drawing-room Jerry Fleming stationed himself as if determined to become a fixture of that pleasant spot. An awning kept out the glare of the August afternoon; the breeze came in through a green screen of climbing vines and potted geraniums; behind this shaded window the noises of the avenue were less obtrusive, though the window stood wide open to the out-of-doors. By long habit Jerry Fleming knew exactly the spot where one should stand to command the street below. He planted himself at this point, his hands thrust in his pockets, his good-looking young face gloomily set, obstinacy in his athletic shoulders. The housemaid who had ushered him in looked at his back. There was a secret sympathy in her Irish eyes. She coughed discreetly.

"How long ago did Miss Betty go out?" he asked, without taking his eyes from the street.

She told him two hours; and moved toward the door.

"Ah . . . when do you expect your sister from Ireland, Nora?"

She came back, her Irish heart touched to confidences.

"An' sure at last, Mr. Jerry, I've sint her the tickets! Next mont' it is she'll be here. Miss Betty says she can stay with me till she finds a place!"

"That's good of Miss Betty, . . . *where* did you say she's gone, Nora?"

Nora twinkled and looked at him with unfathomable sympathy. "She's gone out in a grand new automobile, sir—one the Italian gintleman sint 'round. She—she's been out in it every day for a week, sir. She's like a colleen with a new toy. An' it isn't blamin' her I'd be, either. The iligance of that car, sir—the red leather cushions—the brass, and thim shiny things—the——"

Jerry Fleming made a movement of profound disgust. Gloom of a deeper shade settled over his face. "Brass and shiny things!" he muttered. "That's all a girl knows about an automobile! Brass—" and here he stopped to listen to the musical notes of a Gabriel horn, which, backed up by the exhaust of a

powerful four-cylinder motor, sounded above the noises of the avenue.

"That's her!" Nora cried, and hastened into the hall.

Jerry leaned eagerly out between two geraniums and scanned the street. Around the corner swept a car with rakish bonnet and a conspicuous expensiveness. It drew up at the curb as impressively as an ocean liner making her dock. It stood palpitating in a high-bred and elegant sort of manner while an exceedingly pretty girl stepped out. Jerry's gaze devoured the girl, but—it must be confessed—only for an instant. It was the car that drew his eye, a critical, motor-wise eye, and held it until Betty Albright threw open the drawing-room door.

She hastened across the room with a frank hand extended.

"Why, Jerry, old fellow! It's been an age since I've seen you! Where've you been, and how——" she broke off suddenly to dart to the window.

"Jerry, quick! Before Pierson drives off! Isn't it a beauty! We've been out Riverside Drive, around the Monument and back through the park, twenty miles in thirty-two minutes!"

Jerry put his hands in his pockets and stared gloomily over her shoulder at the car.

"Humph! . . . weight all up front. I suppose you went chugging down into every hole in the road between here and the Boulevard."

"No, we didn't!" she retorted. "At least —there weren't any holes. I'm too truthful; I must say the roads were pretty smooth."

"Exactly! Just like the Continental roads this car was built for. You try to run that glittering thing across country—over Western roads, for instance, and you'd find it would be like trying to sail a boat with the ballast all up in the bows! You'd find it——"

The girl lifted up two mocking hands. "Now, Jerry, spare me! I know you've got just one motor-idea in your poor head, but really you can't expect me to swallow it, too! Now can you? Here I've been having the most heavenly spins in a love of an Italian car—can you expect me to turn around and pick flaws in it?"

He looked disgusted at the very name. "I tell you, Betty, the Italian car is all right for good roads, but how would it show up west of Chicago, say?"

Betty stared. "How do you know?" she

cried defiantly. "Have you ever driven your car west of Chicago?"

"No, but I could!" He threw back his head and laughed boyishly. There was the sparkle of an interesting idea in his eyes. "Say, Betty, wouldn't it be nuts to race Vannuccini across to Portland, Oregon? Can't you see him in the dust of the Red Desert with that gilt-edged car of his? Or asking for vermouth in Medicine Bow, Wyoming? Oh, by Jove! wouldn't I enjoy that!"

His laugh rang out, and she joined him; but it was noticeable that she did not pursue the subject. Indeed, the color had mounted perceptibly in her cheeks, and she hinted, a little stiffly, that she found it difficult to imagine either one of them pegging across the continent. Then she laughed.

"Come now, Jerry," she said, "we won't argue about things when we haven't seen each other for six weeks, shall we? Find a comfortable chair and tell me all about yourself. You've been up in Michigan, your mother told me; and you never came to talk things over, or say good-by, or anything. I began to think maybe you'd found another pal, Jerry."

As she talked she was removing her veil.

There were yards of it, but she emerged finally with a lovely color and a disheveled head of hair that seemed to have caught all the sunlight of the sunny August day. She was splendidly alive; her tall young figure was full of graceful strength; she walked as if every step was a joy; the grasp of her hand was as frank as a boy's; her fine gray eyes looked out on the world with a healthy optimism.

"I hadn't," he answered briefly, from the window. He was looking at the car again, critically. "I'll bet Vannuccini's engine just eats gasoline when he gets off the boulevards."

The girl moved across the room to where he stood. She looked up at him with an amused lift of her eyebrows. "See here, Jerry Fleming," she said suddenly, "what's the matter with you? Why—you absurd boy! you aren't jealous of the new Superba, are you?"

She faced him squarely, her head thrown back a little, her gray eyes keenly questioning, a shade of disapproval in her glance. "There's one thing I've always believed of you, Jerry," she went on. "I've always thought you a real sportsman. Do you think it's sportsmanlike to refuse a word of approval when another man does a bit of good work?"

A quick flush mounted to Jerry's cheeks. He walked once around the room and when he came back to lean against the window in which she was sitting, there was a new expression in his eyes.

"Betty," he said, "you're such a square sort of a girl yourself, you can't understand how a fellow like myself has to struggle to keep his mouth shut when he sees things going on that he would just like to—to *knock!*"

A little cool shadow settled over the girl's face. She had a way of lifting her chin and looking off at some indefinite spot in space when she disapproved of anything.

"I suppose," she said, "you mean Mr. Vannuccini?"

Jerry reddened, but this time his clean-cut jaw set stubbornly.

"Yes," he said, "I mean Vannuccini. Betty, it's mighty hard to be generous and sportsmanlike and all that kind of thing when a fellow has cut you out of your work and—and when it looks as if he was after the—the girl —you——"

Betty suddenly laughed. Her laughter was capable of as much meaning as her charming face; it could be as disconcerting as her up-

lifted chin. It put Mr. Jerry Fleming neatly in his place, as a person who had presumed, just a trifle. Jerry colored, but he could only look helplessly at her—at the lovely curve of her chin as she lifted it, at the alluring way she crinkled up her eyes when she laughed. An old, desperate speculation came into his mind: what would she do if he should seize her firmly —if he should stop her laughter with a kiss?

"Betty!" he cried, "don't laugh at me! I'm in earnest this time."

She looked contrite. "Dear Jerry! I won't laugh at you any more, if you won't take things for granted. Now, tell me all about it. I thought you would surely come to tell me why you left the company; but you didn't, and I had to get all my news from Dad. He was furious, Jerry! You know Dad——"

"I'm afraid I do," he interrupted with a rueful grin. "He hasn't much use for me, has he?"

She smiled at him frankly. "Less now than ever! You see, Jerry, Dad's a man who has made a success by sticking to one thing like a dog to a bone. A test of character with Dad is whether a man sticks or whether he whiffles about, as he calls it. Now, he's convinced since you left the Superba people that you're a

hopeless *whiffler;* says no young man in his right mind would leave an old, successful company just to air his own ideas."

Fleming's boyish face took on an expression of obstinacy she had never seen there before; she looked at him with a new interest.

"You don't understand the situation, Betty," he said quietly. "When the Superba people adopted Vannuccini's designs for their new model, it made it impossible for me to stay in their drafting-room any longer."

"But, why?"

"Because I should have to give up my own design if I stayed; I should have to make cars after another man's model, and I couldn't do that, Betty. You see," he added simply, "I believe in my own design and I don't believe in Vannuccini's."

The girl looked at him thoughtfully. "But, Jerry," she said slowly, "are you sure you are right? Mr. Vannuccini is known all over Europe as a motorist, his models are used by half the big factories over there. Father thinks he's the coming designer of automobiles. You know, Jerry, you're not a Methuseleh or a Solomon and you've—well, you've had some pretty wild flights, now, haven't you?"

Fleming laughed. "I suppose you mean that little air-ship venture last summer?"

"Yes, that, and others—a whole string of them since you left college! Do you mind telling me what you propose to do now, Don Quixote?"

His downcast expression vanished. He thrust his hands into his pockets and his face became confident and eager. "I'm going to make the great American car, my girl! I'm going to show this country—and the Italians! —that the American manufacturer is the one who understands American roads. I'm going to make a car with a double-opposed engine, amidships in the body with a piston stroke so long that it will climb the rocks in a Maine pasture and eat up a New York State snow-drift—a car that will leave your Italian four-cylinder swell far to the rear on the average American road!"

"That's a large order," she smiled, "and will take money."

"I know," he said. "You remember grandfather left me twenty-five thousand? Well, that's gone in. Walters and Cushman and I have bought a plant up in Michigan—small affair, of course; but a start. They've allowed me an equal amount of stock for my design,

and we're going to show people, your father included, what a spunky, live, all-American car can do next year!"

Betty's eyes sparkled. "Good for you, Jerry!" she cried. "It will make Dad furious; but I like it! I like you when you talk that way! I like a man that has 'never-say-die' for his motto, anyway. Here's my hand!"

She laughingly held out her firm little hand. Fleming took it in his large sunburnt one and looked at it tenderly. As he stood beside her chair, he himself was very well worth looking at, with his clean-cut eager face, and his athletic shoulders.

"I wish you were giving it to me for keeps, Betty," he said, soberly. "I'd take mighty good care of it. I'd——"

She shook her head. "This is the nineteenth time," she said, lightly. "You know on the last occasion you promised you wouldn't do it again—not for a year at least. I thought by that time there would be another girl, Jerry."

"I knew better," he said. "Why, Betty, you dear! I've been in love with you ever since Miss Harvey's dancing class, when you wore those two molasses candy braids down

your back. Do you remember? There's never been another girl since, and there never will be another, Betty. Look here, dear—there's something I came up here this afternoon to ask you. I know it's the nineteenth time, but —isn't there any hope for me, Betty? I'm going to leave next week for the factory; I won't be seeing you very often now—and I could work like twenty men if I could only have one spark of encouragement from you, dear. Can't you give me a little bit of hope, Betty?"

The girl looked at him with a troubled expression in her candid gray eyes.

"Jerry," she said, "I like you awfully; but somehow I never can take you quite seriously. You see I'm Dad's daughter. Dad and I have always been pals and what he thinks I think, because I believe in him. I know he's crusty, Jerry, and he's maybe not always so polite as he might be, but he's the straightest, finest man I know, and I can't help but respect his opinions. He—I must be truthful, mustn't I?—he doesn't believe in you, Jerry; says you haven't made good——"

"But, Betty, don't you believe in me? I'm going to make good now. If I knew I was working for you I could do anything, dear little girl!"

She looked at him gravely. "You must do something *first,*" she said. "No woman can supply a man with backbone and the power to *stick.* You show me first!" she added smilingly; and Jerry remarked how very like her father's was Betty Albright's square little chin. But there was something behind her words which set his blood to galloping. He caught her hand in an eager clasp.

"If I show you, Betty," he whispered, "if I make good—will you marry me—will you, dearest?"

For the least fraction of a second she swayed toward him; then with an elusive laugh she fluttered away to the deep embrasure of a window overlooking the street. Fleming's face lost its glow, but he followed her resolutely, and taking hold of her shoulders turned her face toward his.

"It isn't Vannuccini, is it, Betty?" he asked, his voice dropping.

She turned away from him, but not before he had seen the faintest color rise in her cheeks.

"I don't know," she said. "It may be Mr. Vannuccini—and it may be you! No, you're not to have my hand on any such slight pretext. It wouldn't do, anyway, for Signor Vannuccini himself is coming up the avenue!"

CHAPTER II

"NO shop talk!" Betty had warned him swiftly as she moved across the room to give her hand to the last arrival.

The injunction was not necessary, for the Italian's drawing-room manner always threw Jerry Fleming into a state of dumb rage. When Vannuccini bent over Miss Albright's hand with a murmur of pleasure, Fleming felt moved to retire into a remote corner and kick the furniture. He was fathoms deep in love with Betty Albright; but if he had practiced for a month he could not have expressed as much admiration in a long speech as the Italian had just conveyed in a handshake.

And he hated tea. To stand and balance a fiendishly slippery cup and saucer, trying not to look ferocious, reduced him to a state of smoldering irritation in which he might at any moment forsake the social amenities and become the primitive man, openly casting defiance in the teeth of his rival.

"Please sit down, both of you," said Betty, scenting danger. But Jerry, monumentally

dignified, would not sit down as long as Vannuccini stood; Vannuccini knew he showed to advantage standing, and so they balanced their teacups on opposite sides of the table.

"I believe I had the pleasure of watching you trying out a new car on the Boulevard this morning, monsieur," remarked Vannuccini, affably.

"Very likely," returned Fleming, briefly.

The Italian's eyebrows lifted the least fraction of an inch. He turned toward Betty with a movement that had the effect of a tolerant shrug. Betty felt herself grow warm. She was ashamed of Fleming's brusquerie—and deep in her heart ashamed of herself for being ashamed. But the woman is not born who does not like the man she admires to have plenty of *savoir faire*. Vannuccini was a resourceful, polished cosmopolite. His manners, moreover, were like his clothes—the best that could be manufactured, and always skillfully assumed with regard to time and place. In the morning business hours he wore English tweeds and a hearty frankness; at dinner with a heavy stockholder he glistened in silky broadcloth and a deferential wit; at afternoon tea with ladies (he never used the word women) his frock-coat, his boutonnière, his gaiters

and his manner were all Italian, subtly caressing, with a delicate suggestion of melancholy and a soupçon of daring. The difference between the two men was like the difference in their hands—Vannuccini's slender, nervous, exquisitely manicured; Fleming's sinewy and strong, brown from the sun, the nails broken and stained with the work of a man who not only drives his own car but who can rebuild it from its parts.

"And you, mademoiselle, did the new Superba please you this afternoon?" Vannuccini was asking.

"Immensely!" cried Betty, all the more fervently because she was aware of Fleming's dour glance upon her. Signor Vannuccini expressed himself as delighted; he had come, he said, to propose an excursion through the Catskills for the following week. Did Miss Albright think she could persuade her father and her friend Mrs. Whitman to undertake a little tour with him in the new car?

At this point Jerry put down his cup and began to walk about the room.

"I am sure I can!" declared Betty, with an eye to Jerry's back. "How very nice of you to think of it!"

"It is mademoiselle who confers a happi-

ness," murmured Vannuccini. "Shall we say Tuesday of next week? We can explore your beautiful Catskills and return by way of the Delaware Water Gap, if you like."

"It sounds lovely; but I positively must be back in town Friday——"

"But, of course!" cried Vannuccini gaily, "with the new Superba that is entirely possible. On Friday at any hour you name I can restore you to your friends."

Jerry returned to the tea table; there was the light of battle in his eye. "You can't do it," he remarked, bluntly.

Betty bit her lip; and Vannuccini turned upon him a politely incredulous eye.

"You think not, monsieur? I am interested to know why——"

"Because your car is not built for the conditions you will find just now in the Catskills. We have had a rainy month; the roads are heavy. Your car weighs too much. With the engine in front it is not balanced for the kind of roads you will find up there. You might make the run in six days, but you can't make it in three."

Vannuccini had opened his lips to reply when a dry chuckle from the doorway interrupted him. Betty's father, Hiram D. Al-

bright himself, had entered in time to catch the last of the conversation. He was a small man, with a large head, and incredibly keen eyes under a gray penthouse of eyebrow. His glance at Jerry was like the flash of polished steel.

"Perhaps you could do it yourself, Fleming," he said dryly.

A flush burned through the tan on Fleming's cheek. "I am sure I could, sir," he said steadily. "I've just made the Catskill run, and I am certain the new Superba, with its engine under the bonnet, cannot take those bad roads at the speed my Nero made over them last week."

"Don't agree with you," said the old man brusquely, with a gesture that disposed of Fleming and his assumptions for good and all. He refused Betty's offer of a cup of tea, and would have gone on his way without further parley, when Vannuccini's next words stopped him.

"Perhaps Mr. Fleming will do Mr. Albright and myself the honor to prove what he has just said about his car?" His tone cased the remark in silk. "I am at your service any time, monsieur." He turned to smile at Betty. "It would be amusing, would it not, made-

moiselle?—a little race from here to—shall we say Buffalo, and back?"

There was something in the tone and in the Italian's glance at Betty, as if they two had found an affair of quiet amusement, that sent the blood to Fleming's head. He was aware of an ironical half contempt in the way Hiram Albright looked at him; he saw Betty color as if she already expected him to fail. The fighting spirit in him rose.

"So short a run," he said as calmly as he could. "Make it from New York to Portland, Oregon, and it will be worth while."

Vannuccini stared. "You are ambitious," he said. "May I ask what you have to stake on such a contest?"

It was not so much a question as a veiled taunt. A silence fell on the room. Mr. Albright watched them, bright-eyed and keen; Vannuccini looked at Fleming, and Fleming looked at Betty. Her eyes were bright with some enigmatic excitement. Fleming knew in that instant that he stood on trial to win or lose the respect of this girl who was more to him than anything else in the world. For an instant he felt the heart-clutching fear of the player who puts everything he possesses on the red or the black. Then his brain cleared.

"I will stake my interest in our new factory against $25,000," he said, "on the outcome of a trial between your Superba and my Nero, the route to be from New York to Portland. Do you take me?"

The two men opposite him looked at each other briefly. "Agreed!" said Mr. Albright with a dry laugh. "It will be the best kind of a try-out for the new Superba, and will settle—several things."

His glance rested humorously for an instant on his daughter; then he said: "Get me a pencil and note book, daughter. We may as well agree on the conditions of the race—before Fleming changes his mind."

"I shall not change my mind," said Jerry quietly. "Shall we say the fifteenth of August for the start?"

CHAPTER III

MANY times before the day set for the beginning of the transcontinental run Fleming saw in his mind's eye the flushed, triumphant face of Betty Albright as she had whispered to him after the signing of his compact with Vannuccini: "I'm glad they couldn't bluff you out, Jerry. You've got your chance, now."

Yes, he had got his chance; and he was straining every nerve and sinew, every ounce of brain, all the ingenuity and foresight he possessed to make the best of it. There had been a lively quarter of an hour with his partners, Walters and Cushman, when he laid before them immediately upon his arrival in Lansing the thing he had undertaken to accomplish. They had not hesitated to tell him they considered him "up in the air!" When sarcasm and angry protest failed they fell back on a line of patient reasoning. In the midst of their eloquence Fleming had said, decisively:

"Look here, you fellows don't know a good thing when you see it. We've started a new factory; and we've got the whole field to con-

quer, haven't we? The big fellows and the old-established makers have their hundreds of thousands to spend in display advertising for next season, while we—well, you know what kind of a splash we can make with our present resources. The Superba people are preparing to fight us tooth and nail with their new model; and we've got the foreign machines to buck against as well. It strikes me that what we want right here is publicity, if we're to get in out of the rain—and more publicity than we can afford to buy through the thousand-dollar-a-page magazines, too! Now, see here: this is my scheme. . . ."

He drew a chair in front of a map stretched on his desk, but Walters, whose mind had ambled along just a little behind the argument, interrupted with an exasperated:

"But the risk, Fleming—the risk! If you lose this race—and you will, you know!—you let this Italian in for a controlling interest in our factory. Good Lord! you might as well sell out to the Superba people and be done with it!"

Fleming looked at his senior partner; his eyes were steel colored.

"I don't calculate on losing—not this trip, Walters," he said.

And Cushman, who spoke little during the interview, had looked at their junior partner keenly. A speculative interest began to gather in his eyes.

"Wait a minute, Walters," he said quietly. "I believe Jerry's got hold of something worth listening to."

.

Coming up on the boat to Detroit the night before, Fleming had been so full of his project that sleep was out of the question. In the starlit night he had paced up and down the deck, every scene in the Albright drawing-room reënacted in his mind. In that quiet hour he measured all that he risked; and he measured—though he felt it to be immeasurable—what might be his if he but risked successfully. For in a day he seemed to have grown from a boy to a man, with a man's judgment and a man's insight. He understood as he had never done in all his boyish wooing the need in Betty Albright's nature which demanded that the man she gave herself to should "make good."

In the darkness he smiled at the words and at the remembrance of the fearless lift of her square little chin. Well, if it was in him to

do it, he was going to make good for Betty's sake. What risks he ran in this most serious issue of his life he would not dwell upon, though the facts were brought home to him by an accidental meeting on the boat with an old friend, a man many years his senior, who out of a long and varied experience as a motorist gave him a frank opinion of the undertaking.

"Well, your nerve is perfect," Barry, his friend, had laughed. "Do you happen to be up on the transcontinental route? No? And you've put up your twenty horse-power Nero against a four-cylinder, forty horse-power machine! Why, my boy, on the good roads between New York and Chicago your Italian car will leave you so far behind you'll never catch up."

Fleming looked unconvinced. "I may have to take his dust on the good roads," he rejoined, "but don't forget this run is across Wyoming, Idaho, and Oregon. My car is a bulldog on bad roads, and with a Schebler carburetor a steep gradient is a picnic to that Nero Mountaineer of mine. That's why I stipulated the finish should be in Portland, Oregon. Where I'm going to win out over that gilt-edged car of Vannuccini's is there,

in the climb over the Cascades, or working through the desert in Wyoming."

The older man admitted that there was some truth in this view; but he added, seriously:

"You don't know what you're in for, Jerry. West of Cheyenne there are two-hundred-mile stretches where you won't find enough sweet water to fill a teacup; where the trail fades out and you will have to chop your way through sage brush. You'll sleep in your clothes many a night and go hungry many a day. And then, when you've made perhaps three-quarters of the way, a broken axle or cracked cylinder may lose you your race by twenty-four hours. You take too many chances, my boy; better give it up, that's my advice to you."

Fleming rose from his chair to stare down at the dark rush of water past the bows. "There's no giving up for me, now," he said. "This thing has got hold of me. I'm not afraid of hardships and I believe in my car. I've got to win out. To me it—it means a good deal more than twenty-five thousand. If I lose, I lose something I've wanted ever since I was a boy going to Prep school—and Miss Harvey's dancing class!"

He laughed as if half ashamed of his admission; but he added, soberly: "Maybe you

think I'm an irresponsible fool to rush into this thing, Barry, but I believe it's the best chance of my life to show what's in me."

The older man was silent for a time, and then he said slowly:

"Well, I guess there comes a time in every man's life when it's wise to be foolish—when he's got to play high if he's to win the game. If you're sure this is your chance, Jerry, take it in the best style possible. Now, you'll want a complete list of the equipment needed. I'll get it for you from Whitman, who made the transcontinental run in an Oldsmobile a couple of years ago. Follow his advice; never neglect a detail; don't take anything for granted —and may the luck of the foolhardy go with you!"

When he left the boat Fleming had felt keyed up to a tremendous pitch of energy. It was well that it should be so, for he had a scant fortnight before him in which to attend to a thousand details. Next in importance to his interview with his partners was the choice of a mechanic to go with him on the long drive. On this point Fleming felt he had no need of advice; he knew the man he wanted, and two hours after he arrived in Lansing he was deep in talk with a blue-eyed, sandy-haired young

fellow, who wore at the moment overalls and a mechanic's jumper and listened eagerly to the plans Fleming unfolded.

Sid Johnston, with his cheerful air of instant readiness for love or war, was the ideal sharer of such a venture as his employer proposed. He knew and loved every inch of his car; he was as sanguine as Fleming himself; he was keen and resourceful, and Fleming knew one occasion at least when Sid Johnston had shown himself recklessly devoted to his employer's cause. It was during a famous race that the battery box in Fleming's car had broken loose. For forty miles, while the car skidded and swerved dangerously, Johnston had held the box between his knees, averting a catastrophe and making it possible for Fleming to come in second at the finish. On that occasion a frantically cheering crowd had lifted the sandy-haired little mechanic from the car, and Fleming felt that their enthusiasm was well merited. As he had divided with Sid the triumphs of that memorable contest, so he had shared with him the adventures and vicissitudes of many others. They had come to regard each other as comrades in adventure rather than as employer and employee.

When Sid listened to Fleming's account of

his new undertaking his eyes glistened with approval. He heard the call of the road, and instantly his mind leaped forward to grapple with the problems that were as so many joys to him.

"Say!" he exclaimed, "it's a sure thing! I'm with you, Boss. And I've got an engine down in the testing-room that's a little beauty. Say, if you'll come down now we'll try it out with the brake test. Why, it's a cinch—what we'll do with that engine in the old Mountaineer!"

Thus, forty-eight hours after Fleming said good-by to Betty Albright in New York, his preparations for the race were well under way. The choosing of the engine he was to use in his car had been a crucial moment; for on the perfection of this, the heart of his car, would depend in a large measure his success or failure. For this reason the commonly used dynamo test was not depended upon. Under Fleming's critical eye Johnston applied to engine after engine what automobilists call the "brake test," in which by means of a long lever a block of wood is forced down upon the flywheel of the engine; attached to this lever are scales which record each added pound of resistance, and according as the engine runs

smoothly or "dies" under the test its power and quality are recorded.

In the engine finally chosen Fleming felt the utmost confidence. As he worked day by day over each detail of his car and equipment his spirits were high with the certainty that with such a will to succeed and nothing left to chance he could not fail. From early morning till late at night he and Johnston worked, testing the parts of his car as it was taken to pieces and reassembled, studying the problem of additional gasoline and water tanks, of clearance and balance. In the frame of the car was built a three-inch windlass, with a crank and ratchet on either side and with two hundred feet of wire cable wound about the drum. This part of their equipment would come into play when there should be a steep river bank to climb or an arroyo to get out of.

To lessen the dangers of mountain climbing sharpened sprags were attached to the rear axle and an emergency brake to the flywheel. A cleverly constructed rack on the running-board carried a pail and shovel, besides extra gasoline and water tanks. A special device of Fleming's was a set of sand-tires. Made of canvas stuffed with cotton-waste they strapped around the rims, the Goodrich pneumatics fill-

ing out the center of the sand-tires, thus giving to each wheel a tread of several additional inches. A pair of oil lamps and a six-inch Solar searchlight connected to a double generator were installed. On the dashboard were placed a gradometer to register the percentage of the grades and a Warner autometer to indicate the rate of speed and distance traveled.

Finally, every nut in the car was tightened as much as possible without stripping the threads, a hole drilled through the end of each bolt and cotter pins inserted. Every precaution was taken, every ounce of ingenuity the two men possessed was used to meet any possible emergency; and Fleming felt the pride of the successful shipbuilder as he superintended the last bit of work on the car.

Three days before the fifteenth the Mountaineer was shipped by express to New York. After careful study of Whitman's suggestions as to equipment Fleming drew up a list of the articles to be stowed in the tonneau before they left New York. For the sake of the motorist who may be interested in the needs of the transcontinental driver the list follows:

Rubber hats, shirts, gloves and hip boots; high cut leather shoes, flannel shirts, sweaters, army blankets, leather coats and corduroy

trousers. Pail, axe, spade, coil of emergency wire, rope, pulleys, State maps, repeating rifle, Colt's automatic revolvers. Spit-fire spark plugs, oil gun, blow torch, folding jack, extra set wirings, short piece garden hose for repairing water pipes, Weed tire chains, pump, tire irons, extra chain, monkey wrenches, pipe wrenches, small anvil, set files, extra valve springs, Gabriel horn, bar soft steel, extra batteries, Robert's ammeter, extra brake bands, extra brake linings, half dozen inner tubes, two extra Goodrich casings fitted with Bailey tread, sprags for rear axle, graphite, extra gasoline tank, Hartford shock absorbers, barometer, compass, extra dust caps, assortment bolts, nuts and cotter pins. Mess kit.

On the afternoon of the fourteenth Fleming called at the Albrights' to say good-by to Betty. He felt that fate had dealt him a hard blow when he found Vannuccini also making his adieux. Betty was in high spirits; she declared that she would be at Times Square to see them off. Fleming reminded her that the hour for starting was five in the morning. It made no difference, she would see them start if it was three!

And she did. In Jerry's mind the memories of that morning hour remained for the rest of

his life. The streets were not yet filled with their human tide and the vicinity wore a waiting look when Betty and her father drove up to the rendezvous. Fleming and Sid were already there, their car looking like an old campaigner with its tarpaulin-covered tonneau and extra tires; and just as a clock near by struck five Vannuccini's big red Superba whizzed up the street. Betty, as cool and pretty as a flower in her lavender linen, beamed upon them from her electric runabout. Even her father showed that he felt the interest of the moment, and the two mechanics looked each other over with critical eyes. The hour had come for farewells.

Vannuccini, very handsome in faultless French touring clothes, leaped from his car and said his good-by in a low voice as he bent over Betty's hand; Fleming descended more slowly, some of the boyish excitement fading out of his face as he watched them.

"Good-by, Betty," he said, trying to make his voice matter-of-fact. Then his eyes met hers. "I'm going to make good!" he added —"for you."

She smiled at him; but he could not help seeing that her eyes wandered to where Vannuccini was climbing to the driver's seat in his

car. He admitted to himself that the signor with his beautiful red Superba was enough to catch and hold any girl's eye. His heart sank, but a stubborn look came into his eyes as he took hold of the starting crank. In another instant they would have been off, but Betty suddenly stood up and called after them gaily.

"I've got an idea!" she cried. "I'm going to Batavia to-morrow to visit my aunt, and I'll take dinner with the one who gets there first!"

"Good! until Batavia, au revoir!" responded Vannuccini.

"See you in Batavia, Betty!" called Fleming, throwing in his clutch, and the long race was on.

CHAPTER IV

SID JOHNSTON to his friend Terry Moore.

BATAVIA, August 17th.

DEAR TERRY:

Don't ever take a contract to act as mechanic for a man in love. That's the advice I thought I ought to write you while I'm able, for it's dollars to doughnuts that if we go on as we've started I'll be receiving my weeping friends at the morgue next week. Say, I'm game, but the pace for the last three days has me guessing till my nerve is getting frayed at the edges.

We've put the fear of death on the innocent natives of New York State; we've been off the road and into the Montezuma marshes, and we've come within two inches of ramming a fast freight and we on high speed with the clutch locked in. I don't want any more racing when there's a girl at the other end. A man ain't responsible under those circumstances—but I'll tell you about it.

Terry, I'm sorry you missed our start from Times Square the other day. It was as good

as the theater to see the Count of Monte Cristo choo-choo up in his red fire-wagon. He was got up regardless, and, Terry (it causes me bitter tears to write it), his car is a bird! Looks as if it would sail off and leave us a vanishing speck on the horizon. It's got speed and style, and if it carries much equipment it is stowed away so you'd hardly notice it. While we—well, you saw our outfit at the garage, business-like but not elegant. I took the rival outfit all in—four cylinders, tremendous big gas tank, I-beam front axle with that little foreign curve that makes people think it can go, and the whole blooming outfit finished up in that indescribable red that only the foreign painters know how to get. I tell you, it struck me that we were up against a pretty stiff proposition when I sighted that car; but when I got the chance I cocked my ears and listened, and—say, you know the throb of a well-timed motor? Well, this one is off somewhere. It didn't do any missing, but some of the explosions came too near together and others had a habit of lingering. I saw that the Boss heard it, too, and I said, "Connecting-rod trouble ahead." He nodded; and couldn't help looking a little more cheerful. Sure enough—but I haven't got to that yet.

It didn't take us long after we got outside of town to find out that the Superba could beat us on good roads, and after a couple of miles we dropped back to second place, well out of the dust, for the agreement was there should be no racing the first day and each crew was to spend the night at Albany.

At Poughkeepsie, where we had a good dinner, there were the usual willing ones to tell us how Mr. Italy had gone on through town like a scared deer a whole hour before we got in. I saw the Boss get a troubled look and I knew he was thinking that that Dago wouldn't stick to his agreement about Albany. I didn't think he would either, so I hung on and said nothing when the Boss began taking corners at a speed that I thought would pull our tires off at every turn. I don't mind speed, but honest, I didn't think I'd be alive as far as Albany, and I wanted to see the capitol before I passed in my checks. We had our autometer showing fifty an hour, and that's going some for a two-cylinder, twenty-four horse. The Boss kept his foot down hard on the throttle until I began to think I'd signed as an airship sailor, when we swung around a corner and saw something that looked good to us. Vannuccini's engine had begun to miss,

and his mechanic was under the car wiring everything anew.

Say, it was joyful passing that outfit! I was driving and I made up my mind if the Boss wanted me to stop so he could offer the courtesies of the road I'd be struck deaf and whizz right along. But he didn't. I guess he thought of the date he had in Batavia, for he intimated I could shove in my high speed; and we reached Albany at 5:30.

The agreement was that we were to stay there all night, and of course, the Boss, being on the level, prepared to stick to it. He left a call for five next morning, but that didn't satisfy me. The Italian had arrived an hour after we got in. I was going up to bed when I saw him talking like a brother to the night clerk. I don't know why, but I didn't like the look of his back. I picked out a bell-hop who looked awake and I took him aside for a little heart-to-heart talk. The result was that the kid rapped on my door at two in the morning and told me that Vannuccini had settled his bill and left.

Well, I had the Boss out as if the place was on fire, and we only struck the high places on the way to the garage. We were out on the Utica pike so soon after Italy that we could

see the glimmer of his searchlight not more than a mile ahead. Terry, my boy, for two hours it was the wildest thing in the line of a night ride I ever saw, and you know I'm used to going some! It was that thick kind of blackness that comes just before daylight sometimes; and through it, all the telephone poles in existence seemed to be rushing at us. You know, after a man has strained his eyes watching a dark road for a long time, all kinds of queer things seem to be coming at him. I can tell you I wasn't objecting any when daylight came. We didn't stop to eat till we reached Utica; and we pulled into Syracuse only five minutes behind the red car.

At five next morning we were off again. I could see that it was reach Batavia first or die trying, with the Boss. Vannuccini took the safer route into Rochester via Auburn and Canandaigua, but the Boss picked the short cut through the Montezuma marshes. And that's where we skidded in among the frogs. We'd been delayed fifteen minutes tinkering with a coil and the Boss was wild. He began to take his corners too fast, and when we reached the big S in the road over went the rear wheels into the mud and cat-tails of the swamp. We tried to get her out under power,

but the rear wheels just spun around and threw mud and water all over us. Then the Boss dug into the tonneau and brought out the two cranks for the windlass. I carried the end of the cable across the road and made it fast to a telephone pole and we attached ourselves to the windlass. Of course it was hard work, but she came out by inches. That lost us an hour. At Pittsford we learned that the Italian had passed through town at a furious rate over an hour before. Well, the Boss's foot went down crash on the throttle and I nearly turned a flip-flop over the back of my seat as our little car shot ahead. It seemed only a minute before we were in the outskirts of Rochester. I could tell by the Boss's face that he was going to run the risk of an arrest for speeding inside the city limits, when we got a bit of news that made us walk through the city as demure as a girl on her way to church. I had got out to take a look at the gasoline tank, when a couple of kids sitting on the curb sang out:

"Mister, we see the cop arrest a man just now for going too fast."

"Is that so?" said the Boss. "What did his car look like?"

"A great big red one!"

"Did the man have a little black mustache and a tan leather coat?"

"Yes, sir!" both of them yelled, and I guess if the Boss hadn't been in a hurry he'd have given those two kids the time of their lives. He handed them out some silver and last we saw of them they were looking up the road for more luck of that kind.

Well, we didn't know whether Vannuccini was ahead or behind, but three-quarters of the way to Batavia I looked back at a turn in the road and saw a red streak in the landscape. He was coming, on high speed, too. He couldn't take the corners as we could; but when we struck the level stretch into Batavia he came up and went past us like an Atlantic type passenger engine. Say, that was tough, to have to slide behind and see the satisfied smile on that Italian face of his! And there was Batavia in plain sight. I couldn't bear to look at the Boss, for I knew just how he was feeling. I was just thinking of relieving myself by a little language when I saw Vannuccini grab the emergency and slam it down until his rear wheels slid. The road into town crosses the railroad yards, and the Italian was barely in time with his brakes, for a long freight train thundered in, fairly shaving the

spring ends of the big red car as it skidded and slid with the momentum of its sixty-five mile an hour rush.

The rest happened so quick that I didn't know the game until it was all over. Instead of running up to the Superba as it waited for the train to pass the Boss stopped the Nero fully a hundred yards off, and for the life of me I couldn't see why. Our engine kept speeding and when I got out to feel the radiator I was ordered back in a hurry. When there were still six cars of the freight train left to pass us the Boss started the car, and by the time four of them had gone past we were on high speed and going some. Do you see his nifty little game? Of course we only missed ramming that caboose by inches, but we were going at fifty miles an hour when we passed the red car—and Vannuccini had just commenced to speed up his motor. By the time he had thrown in his fourth speed we were yards and yards to the good and going *some!*

With that start at the very edge of the town we were able to romp right in first—though I must confess, only about three car lengths ahead of our glittering rival. But that was enough. Terry, I'm giving it to you straight when I say that the Boss looked as if he was

walking right up the golden stairs to heaven when he got out of the car and took off his hat to the Only Girl who stood on the veranda looking a regular peach in a fluffy white dress.

As I drove the car to the garage I saw the Italian hurrying into the Richmond House. And now, what I'm wondering is whether this strenuous life is to be kept up all the way to Portland. They've an agreement to wire Miss Albright from certain points along the line—and you never can tell what a man in love will do. He'll break his neck trying to make an impression—and that's why I'm writing you while I'm still able.

I must turn in; we're off at four to-morrow morning.

Yours,
SID.

CHAPTER V

TEN days after her dinner with Fleming at Batavia, Betty Albright found herself the victim of a clipping bureau. When a full realization of the situation came to her she was first astounded and then angry. She read the mass of newspaper clippings that began to pour in upon her with a feeling of helpless annoyance. There seemed to be no way to stop them; and worst of all, she could not help but read! They were fascinating, absurd, undignified—and the more interested she grew the angrier she became. She told herself that Jerry Fleming had cheapened himself and the race by bringing into the affair an element of commercialism totally unexpected and unbargained for. For Jerry, it developed from the newspaper clippings, was an extremely modern knight. He was not content to enter the lists with her colors pinned to his sleeve and pure chivalry as his end and aim—not he! While he drove for the love of his lady, Jerry, the astute, was perseveringly advertising his car and his factory.

That was what offended Betty. No woman likes to acknowledge that a man can with perfect facility serve the god of love and the god of business at the same time. And because Betty would not own up to a personal pique, she justified her annoyance on the ground that any personal advertising was against the etiquette of the contest. With very bright eyes and an expression that boded no good to the cause of Mr. Jerry Fleming she laid the matter before her father.

"What do you think, Dad," she said, walking into her father's den one evening before dinner, "Jerry isn't playing fair. He's working some kind of an advertising scheme all along the route. I think it's quite *common* of him! I——"

"Easy, Betty," her father interrupted. "What's this Fleming's doing — exactly, now?"

"Well, look at these!" Betty cried, holding out a handful of envelopes. "I'm being simply snowed under, by a horrid clipping bureau. And they're all Jerry, Jerry, Jerry—and his wonderful car."

"How does it happen they're sent to you, Bet?"

Betty sat down opposite her father,

wrinkled her brows thoughtfully, and said: "Why, I don't know—unless—Dad, do you suppose Jerry——!"

Her father's eyes twinkled. "Yes," he said, "I suppose Jerry! That's part of his advertising scheme. Out of sight out of mind won't do for Fleming. He's evidently notified some bureau to send all news items concerning himself to you—and you've got to grin and bear it, Betty, for there's no stopping a clipping bureau when it once gets to work. Don't open the letters if they bother you."

"Oh, it isn't that!" she exclaimed. "What annoys me is that I don't think it quite nice of Jerry to make the race a sort of circus procession across the continent. It wasn't in the agreement; it wasn't the—the object of the contest."

She colored charmingly as she reflected on that moment of innocent vanity when she had supposed the object of the race to be herself. But her father was blind to anything so delicate as a girl's wounded pride. He was thinking of the letter of the law.

"He's got a perfect right to use the race for advertising purposes if he sees fit, Betty. The advertising part of it," he added with a

grim smile, "was one side we didn't count on —Vannuccini and I. It isn't too late yet; . . . but let's see how Fleming's doing the trick."

He held out his hand for the batch of clippings Betty held. They came from all sorts of sources, the automobile journal, the big daily, and the rural weekly. They formed an interesting sidelight on the character of the man whose doings they chronicled. From them one gained an impression of a picturesque resourcefulness, a daring not hampered by a too modest self-estimate, and perseverance little short of genius.

From Buffalo to Chicago Jerry Fleming's trail was marked by the newspaper paragraphs. They varied from a two-inch notice to a "feature" in the Sunday supplement; they were enriched by pictures—Fleming in, beside and under his car; Fleming, smiling, as he shook hands with the mayor of Elyria; Fleming giving the postmistress of Yorkville, Ill., a ride round the public square; Fleming the intrepid motorist being met by the Automobile Club of Cleveland, Toledo and Elkhart.

And the car! The car performing valiantly in Illinois mud; the car in sunshine and rain; the car standing on its hind legs and charging spiritedly uphill; the car wreathed with laurels

and crowned with victory. Jerry Fleming's incomparable car, than which none better could be met with from New York to Portland!

Betty Albright's father read and read—and then he laughed aloud.

"By George, Betty!" he exclaimed, "the beggar's playing the game. Why, see here, daughter, there's ten thousand dollars' worth of advertising in those clippings. Do you notice the way he's managed to work in his Nero in every notice? Every man, woman and child who reads those papers has read a clever bit of special pleading for Fleming's car—and they'll remember it, too. I never thought I could learn anything from Jerry Fleming."

Betty looked highly disdainful. "Father!" she said, "*you* wouldn't stoop to such methods to advertise the Superba, would you?"

The old man's eyes twinkled. "Sure!" he said, promptly. "Why not? Read this one from Elyria, Ohio,"

"'Dust-covered, burnt like an Indian, but broadly smiling, the genial Jerry Fleming arrived in Elyria yesterday in his staunch little Nero en route for Portland, Oregon. With his mechanic, Fleming has started on a 4,000-mile race across the continent. With special sand-tires he will cross the desert; by the aid of a windlass rigged in the body of his car he will climb the Rockies. In his specially de-

signed Nero he will demonstrate what can be conquered in the way of quicksands, snowstorms, and unbridged rivers by a fine car in the hands of a fearless driver.'"

Mr. Albright laid down the clipping and chuckled. "Isn't that a neat little puff, daughter?" he laughed. "Worth a fifty-dollar ad in the Elyria *Standard.* And see this one—all about how the intrepid Fleming in his never-to-be-beaten car was met by the Auto Club of South Bend, amidst waving flags and tooting horns! Eh—what do you think of that, Betty? Clever, isn't it?"

"*I* call it vulgar!" said Betty.

Her father smiled grimly. "I call it good business," he returned. "I didn't know the young beggar had it in him. But every local puff he gets means time. With all this press business, he must be losing ground fast. How much ahead was Vannuccini when he wired last?"

Betty took from the pile of clippings some yellow envelopes. "At Cleveland," she read, "Mr. Vannuccini sent in his wire four hours ahead of Jerry; and at Chicago Jerry seemed to be six hours behind."

"But the motorists fell over themselves to meet him in Chicago, and he got half a column in the *Inter Ocean!*" commented her father.

"While Vannuccini in my $3,000 Superba appears to have gone through after dark. Not a line in the papers—not a cent's worth of publicity!"

"Mr. Vannuccini," interrupted Betty with dignity, "is racing like a gentleman and a sportsman—not as if he was the advance agent for a circus!"

Her father laughed and then drew his brows together. "By George! the chance he's missing! Why, according to those clippings Fleming hasn't overlooked an opportunity for publicity on the route. He's getting hundreds of dollars' worth of free advertising where we're not getting one."

Betty's head went up. "I didn't know that was the purpose of the race——"

"Why not? Why not?" her father retorted irritably. "What other object would there be? What——"

But Betty had retreated to the door, offended and beginning to get a rosy color. But before she reached it, Nora appeared with the last mail. On the tray Betty recognized the envelope of the clipping bureau. She tore it open with an impatient hand.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "Jerry is impossible! Listen to this:

"Fremont, Nebraska, *Mercury:* 'With a

Billy Primrose grin adorning his mud-bespattered countenance, Jerry Fleming in his famous race across the continent arrived in town this afternoon. He took the schoolma'am and half the school for a ride 'round town in his famous Nero Mountaineer; called on the mayor and dropped in for a chat with the editor. Mr. Fleming has met with samples of Iowa "gumbo" mud in the last three days, but he says that not even this black mud can stall his car, and we're inclined to believe it can't with such a hustler as Fleming at the wheel. Call again, Jerry, and we'll give you the freedom of the town'!"

Betty made a sound of deep displeasure; but her father put his head back and laughed.

"He ought to be in politics," he declared.

"He will lose the race," she said.

"Mebbe, mebbe; but he's going to get a lot out of it, one way. All that free adver——"

"Business!" cried Betty as she ran from the room; "always business!"

Her father pushed a perplexed hand through his hair. "Why, sure, why not, Betty?"

But Betty was rapidly climbing the stairs. In her room she crumpled the offensive clippings and threw them into the waste-paper basket. Then she picked them all out and

smoothed them flat. She read the item from the Fremont *Mercury* again.

"I can't imagine Mr. Vannuccini making himself so—so ordinary!" she reflected.

But she did not put the clippings back into the waste basket.

CHAPTER VI

TWENTY miles from Omaha with its radiator pointed west Jerry Fleming's blue car was eating up the Nebraska section lines. Only fifty miles lay between him and the Iowa border; but already a subtle change had crept into the feeling of things. They were on the threshold of the West. Distance was reckoned, not by miles, but by section lines; the black prairie soil of the corn belt was giving way to arid acres; a hundred miles and the prairie dog town would take the place of the snug villages they were flying through.

It was five in the morning. In Fleming's ears the sweet morning air sang with an inspiriting note. For the first time since the beginning of the journey he was able to throw off the strain of anxious effort and feel something of the wonder of this vast country through which he was driving his car. The wind seemed to rush at them from illimitable space; over great levels the road stretched till it vanished before them; like a calm sea was the prairie as the wind swept over it. Later the sun would beat down upon them from a

relentless blaze of deep blue heaven; but now the whole world seemed waiting in a kind of cool stillness.

Fleming felt his spirits rising. The night before in Omaha he had gone to bed at his hotel, half dead with weariness; and for the first time he had faced the possibility of defeat. For Vannuccini was somewhere eight hours ahead of him. This Fleming had learned at the first telegraph station inside the city limits of Omaha when he sent in his telegram to Betty. The telegraph operator told him an Italian in a big red car had sent a wire from his station at ten that morning; and, "when I saw him last," he added, "he was hitting the macadam west like a scared jackrabbit."

From Buffalo to Chicago and from Chicago to Omaha the run had been uneventful, as flat and monotonous as the level miles their autometer recorded. Good roads and indifferent roads alike had unwound before them without even the dubious interest of an accident. But half way across the level stretches of Illinois there came a change in the shape of a terrific rainstorm. By a lucky margin Vannuccini missed this storm which turned the Illinois loam into a welter of black mud, but Fleming ran squarely into it and was caught like a fly in a web.

For three days they labored through a nightmare of the famous "gumbo" mud, until the car and its occupants were unrecognizable and each wheel resembled a huge mud pie. Working knee deep in mud and water Fleming and Sid had to resort again and again to the cable and windlass; the water in the radiator boiled, and through the lowlands along the RockRiver the water flowed into the car itself. Twice they found a bridge down, and when they reached the Skunk River bottoms in Iowa the climax of their difficulties was reached—they were forced to try conclusions with a mud-hole that for size and depth and general nastiness, as Sid put it, beat every other mud-hole in the world.

But here they met a friend. He was a lean, wiry fellow who said he was a doctor. He was on his way to a country patient in a gasoline runabout of an ancient pattern. As he came plowing sturdily through the mud toward them, a delightful grin began to illuminate his countenance; in an instant he was out of his machine and reaching out to grasp their hands.

"Say!" he cried, "I'm tickled to death to meet you fellows. I've read all about you in the papers. I'm the only man in our town that's got a car, and I sez to myself I'd be

durned if I wouldn't come out and meet you if I knew when you'd be along. Now, what can I do for you?"

Fleming laughed wearily. "Lend me a balloon to get out of this swamp," he answered.

The little doctor viewed their plight in a matter-of-fact way; long residence in the Middle West had made him philosophical on the subject of roads. "Got plenty of rope and a block and tackle?" he asked. They had. The Mountaineer plunged into the mud until stuck fast and then the rope was run out, attached to the front spring hanger and the other end made fast to the doctor's runabout, which still stood on dry land. Thus, with everybody pushing and the free car towing, they managed to work their way across a swamp considered impassable in wet weather. In the meantime the carburetor had shipped some water and the battery had short-circuited. But these were minor evils to the Iowan. He cheerfully fell to work and in the midst of their labors he imparted a bit of information that interested Fleming and Sid immensely. It was to the effect that he had been in an Altoona garage when a big red car was brought in for an overhauling early that morning. From his description Fleming knew at once it was the Superba.

"I was considerably interested in that big car," said the doctor, "and of course I was hanging around most of the time it was in the garage. And, say, it struck me as a kind of useless risk with a speedy car like that, to put picric acid in its gasoline tank——"

"Picric acid!" they echoed; and then looked at each other with a grin of understanding. The weeping skies seemed to lighten; the mud became less formidable. If Vannuccini was resorting to carbazotic, or picric acid, a most dangerous stimulant, to heighten his speed, it meant that he had lost something of his self-confidence in the face of the West.

"Say, the country has given him a jolt," said Sid, in a more cheerful tone than Fleming had heard him use in many miles. "I hope he cracks a cylinder with that acid," he added amiably.

The next news they had of their rival came to them in an equally unexpected manner, and produced in Fleming a curious mingling of emotions. Across the great level stretches of Nebraska the Platte River, with its many long bridges, unrolls itself like a lazy snake. In the spring it swallows its low banks and forms unexpected lakes, but during the dry season it flows sluggishly within bounds, respecting

the rights of the road that travels along beside it. Once he had run out of the path of the storm Fleming found this road a fairly good highway, except for an occasional patch of deep alkali dust. Making the best of it, they were able to reach Palmer, a hundred miles or so west of Omaha, that evening.

Gathered in front of the one hotel of Palmer, with their hats off to the evening coolness, was a large percentage of the male population and a sprinkling of farmers, the sheriff from Prairie Creek, a traveling salesman and a grizzled ranchman from the North country. The traveling man was true to his type and did most of the talking, but the cattleman occasionally threw in a remark. They in company with everyone else in town had looked over the car with intense interest and had proffered advice freely to Fleming. They had then tilted their chairs against the wooden front of the hotel and prepared to utter the final word on automobiling in general. Fleming, who had learned that a friendly interest in the people he met generally resulted in valuable bits of information, smoked his pipe with them and listened. It appeared that the seller of merchandise and the old ranchman had made each other's acquaintance in Kearney the

night before. The occasion had been a poker game in "Solomon's Place," and the memories of the evening continued to prompt them to reminiscence.

"I've sure seen all kinds of players in Solomon's Place," remarked the ranchman after their own game had been threshed out, "but for nerve and endurance that black-haired fellow was one of the stars. Why, he——"

"That's so," interrupted the traveling man. "Maybe you know him?" he turned to Fleming. "Come into town yesterday morning in a big red automobile. I heard he was one of those fellows that are racing across to 'Frisco; I didn't have the chance to ask him, or I would. But I seen him in Solomon's Place——"

"When?" came from both Fleming and Sid.

"Last night, when Peters and I were having that little game we've talked about. He'd been there since ten that morning, Sol said, and it was midnight when Peters and I pulled out. He was playing then, as cool as a cucumber, and I heard next morning he played till three."

"He sure was a practiced hand!" sighed the old ranchman, thinking of his own bad luck in Solomon's Place.

Fleming looked up keenly. "What makes you think so?" he said.

"My son, I've played in 'most every gambling place from Portland to Chicago and I've seen all kinds of players, them that was so green they hurt your eyes, and them that had been playing the game since they were born. And if ever I seen a gambler born and bred that black-haired feller last night was one. Men that play like I do just for fun don't keep it up seventeen hours at a stretch, and they don't have the same kind of a look, some way."

Fleming turned to the drummer. "Can you describe him?"

"Sure; small black mustache, black hair and eyes, looked like a foreigner; and he had a ring with a big green stone on his little finger. Friend of yours?"

"Thanks," said Fleming, and that was all. He strolled off to where the car had been run into the hotel barn, and Sid followed. What he had learned had only confirmed a suspicion that had lain at the bottom of his mind for months. In New York there had been vague rumors concerning Vannuccini which fitted in perfectly with the title of gambler just bestowed upon him by the Westerner. These

rumors had added to his uneasiness on Betty's account; but even now, with his additional evidence, he felt the impossibility of turning tale-bearer against a rival. There was only one thing to do—pull first into Portland. He turned to find Sid looking at him with an eagerly questioning eye.

"Say, I've overhauled the car; she's all ready. If we make a night run of it maybe we can overtake him. What do you say?"

It was a temptation, but Fleming shook his head. He had learned that nothing was to be gained by going without sleep.

"Have the car around at four in the morning," he said. "I think we'll catch up with him at Cheyenne."

As he watched the road ahead of him in the early light of next morning Fleming's mind traveled over the usual problem: where was the other car at that moment, and how could he cut down their stops so as to make up what they had lost in the Middle West? Fleming felt almost a prophetic certainty that if he could enter Wyoming on even terms he could hold his own against even the high-powered Superba.

"With an even start I can beat him in the desert, Sid. We ought to make Kearney some

time this afternoon; Julesburg to-morrow afternoon and——"

He stopped and slowed down as Johnston raised a warning hand. They were twenty miles south of Palmer, headed toward the Platte. Before them a small creek hastening down to the river had worn a deep bed through the alkali soil; the wooden bridge over this creek was perhaps six feet from the water. As usual, Johnston hopped out and tried the structure. He said it looked a little dubious to him; but there was no danger notice posted. They started to crawl across the bridge on low speed.

Exactly in the middle of it there came a warning groan from the structure, and the next instant the car and its freight went crashing down into the water.

A minute later two battered automobilists climbed the bank and cast themselves down on the ground. How they had escaped being crushed under the car they could not tell; in its drop it had evidently tilted to one side and pitched them out. Sid nursed a bruised shoulder, and Fleming, after a moment or two, clambered down to the water again and reluctantly examined the car. His sentiments at that time were too bitter to be voiced in words.

It was the worst moment he had known, for to all outward appearances the car, his great hope, was a wreck. But overwhelmed as he was, he was the first to pull himself together.

" She's got to be righted and pulled out of here," he said tersely. He winced from his bruises as he stood up, but his face was set. He told Sid to collect that part of their outfit that was gracing the bottom of the little stream and to lighten the car. He himself set out across the prairie in the direction of a farm they had passed a mile back.

When he returned he rode a gaunt gray mule, while a greatly curious farmer followed on horseback. The Nebraskan's only comment on the accident was to the effect that they had needed a new bridge a long time and now they would get it.

It took an hour to get the car to the top of the bank; and another to put it in condition to be hauled to town. The fall had broken both front springs, sprung the front axle badly, and damaged the steering gear to such an extent that the wheel would only turn in one direction. The lamps were badly dented, one mud guard smashed, the radiator badly battered and the bonnet caved in. Altogether it was a depressing sight. Jerry's face, as they were ignomini-

ously hauled into Grand Island late that afternoon by the horse and gray mule, was a study in deep dejection.

Here in Hart's garage the blue car stayed that night and the next day while Fleming, Sid and the entire garage force worked feverishly to get it in traveling trim. By nine o'clock the second evening it was ready to go on, not much the worse for the adventure. A glorious moon was just above the horizon. Fleming figured on reaching Kearney, forty miles west, before daylight.

Steering clear of the pitfalls of the lower road, he kept his car close to the foot of the sand hills which undulated to the north of them, magically white in the radiance of the wonderful Western moonlight. Now and then they caught a glimpse of the Platte, shining between its banks. At midnight they were running into Kearney, and the moonlight still held; it lighted, in fact, the entire street and poured into the windows of a garage they were passing. It fell upon the bright red paint of a big automobile standing within and reflected back its shining brass. Johnston, who was driving, brought the car to a sudden stop, flung himself from his seat and peered in at the window. He came running back on tiptoe, as if

afraid the red car would hear him and come out. His face was full of unrighteous joy.

"It's the Superba," he chuckled, "and they've cracked a cylinder—good for that picric acid!"

He climbed in and put his hand to the steering wheel. There was nothing said, but the two understood each other. They did not need sleep now. Two minutes later they were flying through the last half hour of moonlight, straight west. And for the first time in thirteen hundred miles the red car was behind them.

CHAPTER VII

"I'VE got it figured out we can make Julesburg to-morrow afternoon and Cheyenne next day," Jerry was saying, exultantly, as they plunged ahead over the undulating prairie.

"If we ain't handed out another bad luck deal," Johnston added, and at that moment it happened. They had left the road, which was deep in sand and alkali dust, and were running free over the prairie, keeping the river in sight as a guide. What appeared to be a smooth patch of hard earth had invited Johnston to "let her out a notch." The next instant the front wheels sank to the axles with a suddenness that nearly sent them flying over the hood. Fleming had to climb out before he could realize what had happened. Then he saw that the car was hopelessly stalled in a buffalo-wallow! As if it had attempted to traverse thin ice, the two-thousand-pound car had broken through the crust which the alkali soil forms over these old wallows all through Nebraska, and in two minutes it had settled almost to the engine.

Sid climbed down. His language was a striking combination of East Side vituperation and newly acquired Western profanity. Fleming lighted his pipe. He had never found it any relief to swear; in stressful times he generally became doggedly silent. His spirits, soaring in the air a minute before, struck bottom; but his first thought was of what could be done. At the crucial moment the moon had dropped below the horizon. They unfastened one of the oil lamps and decided that the car had sunk as far as it was going to; but it was too dark to extricate it then. There was nothing to do but to try for a couple of hours' sleep.

"Oh, I dunno! this ain't so bad; if I had a cinder in my eye I couldn't tell it from a sleeping car!" said Sid, as he accommodated himself to the tonneau seat.

But it seemed that he was too sanguine. In twenty minutes they were both looking for more coverings. They spoke longingly of the army blankets they were to take on at Cheyenne, and donned their leathers. At two o'clock of a Nebraska morning on the lowlands of the Platte the air is decidedly nipping. Presently they rose again and put on sweaters that had been serving as pillows, and a third time they

got up to hunt for their rubber shirts. The last thing Fleming knew Sid was wrapping his feet in yards and yards of hemp rope. In spite of his misery Fleming laughed. He reflected that something funny could be extracted from almost any situation. He looked for a long minute at the starlit immensity above him—and the next thing he knew Johnston was singing out, "Last call for the dining-car!"

A line of rose showed above the horizon; the gray dawn would shortly give way to the sun, and there was a heavenly smell of coffee from the pot Sid had propped over the blow-torch (for there is no wood to be had in Nebraska); and hope stirred once more in the call to work.

It was eleven that morning before they cleared the car from the mire. Anything stickier than the mud of a buffalo-wallow an Easterner cannot imagine. Before anything could be done with the cable and windlass the running gear had to be freed somewhat from the mud. Sid began to shovel light-heartedly; but in another minute he was standing appalled at the mass of grayish muck that stuck to his feet and refused to be parted from his shovel.

"Say!" he complained, "it's like trying to shovel a ton of molasses candy!"

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In the meantime they had the added chagrin of seeing the red car flash past a half mile away on the river road.

"Twenty an hour!" commented Sid ruefully; but Fleming shut his mouth hard and returned to the problem of how to use his cable when there was not a tree in the State, and the nearest telephone pole looked like a needle in the distance. He got around this difficulty eventually by the process that Westerners call "planting a dead-man." Digging two trenches, one at right angles with the other, he tied the cable to the spade handle and buried it in the horizontal trench, stamping the earth down hard over it and allowing the cable to play out through the shallower second trench. Thus with their cable hitched to the earth itself and both men straining at the windlass handles the mired car began finally to move.

There is to some natures an exhilaration in the conquering of difficulties. Fleming felt once more his high spirits returning as he gave the last twist to the windlass. If resource and determination counted for anything he would start even with Vannuccini by the time they faced the unknown difficulties of Wyoming. In the two last trying days his belief in himself and in his car had grown. With the motor or

gears there had not been a minute's trouble since they left New York. If no more misadventures befell them it seemed reasonable to believe they would leave Cheyenne not far behind the Superba.

At noon they filled their gasoline tanks at Lexington for the one hundred and seventy mile run into Julesburg. Here they found the red car to be less than two hours ahead of them, and the news revived Sid so effectually that he narrowly escaped arrest in driving out of Lexington.

All that afternoon they flew through vast tracks of unfenced prairie land; prairie chickens tempted their rifle, while quail, wild doves and an occasional eagle rose with a whirr of wings from their path. At Lodge Pole they found a ranch owner forming a hunting party to track a band of gray wolves that had killed eighteen head of cattle the night before. And beyond North Platte they ran the car squarely through the middle of a huge coil of rattlesnakes sunning themselves in the sandy trail. It was a lively moment. Snakes of assorted sizes flew in all directions, one large rattler, with his buttons playing a fearful tune, landing in the tonneau of the car. There was no stopping to dispute the right of way; Fleming

and Sid jumped wildly, leaving the outraged rattler in full possession. With their six-shooters they dispatched the several rattlers in sight and then sat down to wait for their car to be vacated. It was some time before the big snake slid cautiously to the ground, and when he finally landed a well-directed shot from Sid's Colt's automatic put an end to what had been a singularly unpleasant quarter of an hour. Sid wiped his brow as he climbed back into his seat.

"And I was happy and safe a block from Broadway!" he remarked plaintively.

Fleming laughed. "Why, Sid, Broadway will be dull after this! Buck up now. Tomorrow we'll be in Cheyenne—and the real fun will begin."

From Lodge Pole to Cheyenne their route dipped through the northeastern corner of Colorado, into the prairie-dog country, the land of sage brush and deceptive distances. That their way was rising to meet the Rockies was becoming evident by the wonderful clearness of the air, which late in the afternoon played them the sort of a trick it has always ready for the Easterner. Fleming, who was driving, noticed that the engine was losing power. He threw out the clutch and turned off the switch,

but the engine still continued to fire. He concluded there was something wrong with the pump, and Johnston climbed down to investigate.

"The pump's all right," he called back, "but there's nothing to pump. There isn't a drop of water in the little old wagon!"

They found a leaking radiator pipe which had evidently been twisted by a tough patch of sage brush, and though the pipe itself could be repaired on the spot with a few drops of solder, the serious part of their difficulty struck them when they found that they had emptied their last water tank ten miles back. A few hundred miles farther east they had run in water up to the hubs; and now when they wanted water the country looked as thirsty as a neglected rubber-plant. The only promise held out to them was where a tiny light had just sprung up across the prairie, apparently a mile or so away. Johnston took the pail and started off, whistling. Fleming lighted the big Solar searchlight to guide him back. and sat him down to wait.

The darkness became complete; in all that vast expanse of starlit level only the one little light gave a promise of human life. He waited two hours, and then suddenly Johnston

stepped out of the darkness. A more thoroughly disgusted face Fleming had never seen—and the water pail was empty.

"Say," he cried, "do you see a light out there, or don't you?"

Fleming assured him he did. "Well," Sid responded, "you can put it down it's one of those spook lights you read about in books. Say—I walked four miles or more and that light never got any nearer than it is now. Every little while I'd hear a snake rustle out of the way and I got to that state where a jack-rabbit looked like a wolf to me. I sez to myself, it's back to the car for mine, and I tell you the rays from that battered old Solar looked good to me! How far do you suppose that glim is, anyway?"

"Haven't an idea, now," said Fleming, and proposed that they drive toward the light till the engine became hot again and then stop to let it cool. Thus they made their way laboriously once more toward the elusive light. It jumped out upon them at last from the window of a small ranch house—and their autometer showed that they had traveled ten miles to reach it.

"Say, don't tell them I started out to walk it!" begged Sid; and Fleming assured him

that no Westerner would need that tale to convince him they were tenderfeet.

Next morning in Cheyenne they had the good luck to find a talkative operator in the telegraph office when they stopped to wire New York.

"He sure was a lordly party," said the operator. "He says to me he wants his money and wants it quick. I explained to him it's the rule of the company a man must be identified. You see, a party in New York had wired him money; but he couldn't produce anyone in Cheyenne that would say he was Vermicelli——"

"Vannuccini," said Fleming.

"D'you know him?"

"Slightly. I am—sort of keeping him company across to Portland. How did you settle the money question?"

"Well, I made out a check for the amount payable to Vannuccini and told him he could take his chances of getting it cashed. And I directed him to Heinze. Don't you know Heinze's place? Biggest gambling palace between here and Portland. Heinze is a good fellow; he'll cash anything if you take it to his place. So off goes the Italian gent to the Crystal Palace. What time? Oh, about eight

last night. No, I don't know where he is now. He wasn't talking much. He puffed up here in his big buzz-wagon and the boys that were waiting for number nine sort of crowded around—wanted to size up the car, you know. But the Count was some peevish; wasn't inviting any of them to ride, and his private thoughts about the country—say, what did he expect? A Turkish bath and a manicure parlor every section or two? He seemed to be sour because there ain't any buffets or café chantongs between here and Julesburg. Say, if he's a friend of yours you'd better put him wise to a thing or two before he gets into the Bitter Creek country!"

Fleming laughed. "I don't think he's waiting for me to catch up with advice. I supposed he wired New York last night?"

"Sure!" said the operator. "It was the only thing that seemed to give him any satisfaction."

Jerry sighed; and wrote on a yellow blank:

"Dear B. The tortoise is still on the job. Not so far behind as this reads. His sentiments just the same. Won't you write? Terribly dangerous country. My young life may come to an end any minute. Hadn't you better write before it's too late?"

Somewhat cheered by this ingenious message to his lady, he said good-by to the friendly operator and whizzed off to the Inter-Ocean Hotel. It had been a severe disappointment to have to spend the night in a section house twenty miles from Cheyenne; but this was as near as they could get with a leaking radiator pipe. And a deeper disappointment awaited him at the Cheyenne post-office. At the general delivery window a thick bundle of letters had been handed him and he had looked them through while Johnston drove him to the telegraph office. Then a sudden blight fell on his spirits; there was not a line from Betty Albright. He had not realized until that instant how keenly he had looked forward to getting this mail at Cheyenne. He had not been surprised to find nothing from her at Chicago—he had seen her so recently; at Omaha he was disappointed, but hopeful; but to find not so much as a post card from her at Cheyenne was a blow.

He could not console himself with the thought that she did not know where to write —the route of the Nero had been in half the papers of the country, owing to his enterprise in the advertising line; he had himself sent her a list of the important stops, and his wires

had been frequent and suggestive. No, in some way he had fallen from grace. Or had he been supplanted? That thought was unbearable; he fell furiously to work on his preparations for the next stage of the journey.

There was five hours' work to be done before they could go on. A new radiator pipe was put in, and to guard against another break from sage brush a piece of sheet iron was fastened from the front axle to the bottom of the radiator. Fleming himself dropped the engine and took out the pistons for a thorough examination. To his satisfaction they were found to be as smooth as glass, in fact in better condition than when the engine was set up.

"This little old car," said Johnston with pride as he installed a new set of dry batteries, "will go some yet. She looks like the morning after the battle, thanks to that bridge going down, but she's all here." Then he stopped and looked suspiciously at the supplies Fleming was stowing away in the tonneau. "I never did seem to like canned tomatoes," he said discontentedly.

Fleming smiled. "You'll like 'em, my boy, before we're out of Wyoming. They'll be

nectar and ambrosia some day when there's only alkali water to drink and nothing but jack-rabbit stew on the menu. My friend of the broken nose back there in the section house put me on to the valuable properties of canned tomatoes. He says they're food and drnk in a country where you can't get either for a hundred miles at a stretch."

Fleming had returned from a shopping expedition with a boy at his heels loaded to the chin, and in the tonneau besides the despised tomatoes he stowed away blankets, coffee, bacon, sugar, condensed milk and crackers. The sharpened sprags had already been adjusted to the rear axle, and the sand-tires, which had been expressed to Cheyenne, were strapped to the rear mudguards. The car, already minus most of its paint and polish, had the air of a scarred old veteran.

At noon there was very little left to do, and Fleming had time, as he ate a hurried meal at his hotel, to wonder how far west of them his rival had got. As he finished his lunch a swift remembrance of what the telegraph operator had said to him about Heinze's "palace" came to him. He wrote a note and left it with the clerk for Sid; and then he inquired the way to the Crystal Palace.

As he turned the second corner he came to a sudden stop. Drawn up at the curb was the Superba, conspicuously ready to be off; and at the wheel was Vannuccini's mechanic. undisguisedly restless.

"Why, hello, Jarvis!" Fleming said. "Not off yet?"

Jarvis grunted expressively and looked with a faint grin at the building in front of which they stood. There was no need for Fleming to turn around; he knew the place was the Crystal Palace, and he felt ashamed of himself that he could feel rather pleased.

"Mr. Vannuccini in there?" he asked.

Jarvis humped himself over the steering wheel. "Been there most of the night," he said—"and two hours this morning. I guess the Count thinks he's back in Monte Carlo. Say, you couldn't just step in there and remind him of what he's out here for—could you?"

"I could," said Fleming; and he turned over in his mind several things. "But I won't!" he added.

He had caught the familiar beat of his own motor approaching, and it put an end to any quixotic impulse he might have given way to. "I really haven't time," he smiled at Jarvis.

The man impatiently fingered his spark lever; and as the Nero gathered speed down the street, they heard an angry blast from their rival's car.

Fleming looked back. In the relentless morning light the Crystal Palace presented a front as coldly ugly as it had been brilliantly attractive the night before. In the noonday sun it might have been taking a siesta for all signs of life Fleming could discern. No one was going in, and what was more to the point —no one was coming out.

"I always suspected a joint in his armor," said Fleming to himself, "but I didn't know it was that kind of a joint."

"What d'you say?" asked Sid.

"I was talking to myself," returned Fleming; but he looked around at his mechanic with a new expression in his eyes. "Sid," he added soberly, "you and I have got to win this race."

Johnston stopped in the middle of a ballad he was warbling. "Sure!" was all he said; but Fleming knew he understood.

CHAPTER VIII

FROM Cheyenne to Medicine Bow, not as the Union Pacific, but as the crow flies, is 120 miles—if you keep the trail. Part of the way this trail follows the old route of the emigrant; over it, perhaps ten times a year, wagons venture; but for miles at a stretch it is a slender thread, so faint that it is difficult for anyone save a rancher or sheepman to follow. From Cheyenne, six thousand feet above the sea, the trail drops to a great plain, in the center of which is Laramie. From this plain the country steadily rises to meet the vanguard of the Rockies.

For twenty miles after leaving Cheyenne, Fleming kept the railroad in sight as it dropped down through hills which were like the undulations of a great sea. With Granite Canyon behind them, he decided to steer their course straight away for Medicine Bow. The trail lay ahead, merely two wheel ruts through the scant grass, sand and sage brush; but still sufficiently plain as long as the light was good.

For further guidance there was a line of telephone poles, marching away in a vanishing perspective over the undulations of the prairie.

"What beats me," said Sid Johnston, who had been staring back over his shoulder at intervals all afternoon, "is that we never seem to get on. See that big boulder back there? Well, we passed that thing half an hour ago, and look at it now. Why, it looks s'if I could hit it with one of those tomato cans if I tried. The whole bloomin' landscape seems to be playing tag with us, do you notice it? That section house back there has come right along with us—and we left the railroad two hours ago! It's a durned funny country," he added mournfully.

Since his last sight of the rails Sid had ceased to sing. The sense of the West's incalculable distances had fallen heavily upon his lively spirit. To his city-bred soul there was something oppressive in this silent following of a deserted trail up and down, up and down, meeting no living soul, seeing no living thing except a little cottontail whisking into its burrow or a rattler coiled on a warm patch of sand beside the trail. The miraculous clearness of the atmosphere, the burning white sunlight, gave a sharpness of outline which was as un-

real to Eastern eyes as a painted forest on the stage.

To Fleming the bigness and loneliness were like a stimulant. As mile after mile the trail unwound before him he felt the exhilaration of the mariner steering through strange seas; the unquenchable spirit of youth rose within him to meet the demands of the adventure; he felt once more sure of himself and his victory.

Not long after sunset they lighted their big searchlight; for there must be no risking this thin thread they were following. According to Fleming's calculations they should soon see the lights of Laramie. Against the velvety darkness of the sky they could no longer make out the line of telephone poles; but under the searchlight the trail unwound plainly before them. Fifteen minutes, a half hour went by; and then suddenly Fleming threw out the clutch and jumped down to examine the ground.

"It's mighty queer," he said as he straightened up; "the trail stops right here."

Johnston climbed down as well. It was true—as a schoolboy wipes a line from a slate, the trail had come to an end. It was rather creepy—this sponging out of what had been

for them as good as a highway. All about them was silence and a sort of luminous darkness.

"I remember seeing a trail branching off two miles back," said Fleming; "we'll run back and have a try at it. If we hadn't been tenderfeet we'd probably have seen that one was the right trail."

But it was not the right trail. They followed it for ten miles, their confidence in it increasing, when again like a line on a slate it was wiped out, under their very searchlight!

"No more of this," said Fleming; "I begin to feel as if I was seeing things. We'll steer by the compass; unless we've run around it, Laramie is off there somewhere to the northwest."

But the difficulty of steering an automobile by compass lies in the fact that it is impossible to get a true bearing unless the compass is taken out and away from the car. Hindered by frequent stops darkness complete and baffling was upon them before they had made ten miles to the northwest. As he drove at low speed through the night some instinct rather than a visual warning made Fleming suddenly throw out the clutch and stop. Be-

yond the radius of their searchlight the blackness seemed to deepen. When Fleming went ahead to reconnoiter he found that the front wheels of their car had stopped just at the brink of a narrow gulley which in the darkness seemed to drop down to unfathomable depths. Fleming felt an uncommonly queer sensation playing up and down his spine as he thought of what might have been if they had run two feet farther. It was a relief to hear Johnston's:

"Say, I guess I'll walk the rest of the way!"

Fleming turned the car about and drove at random with a desperate feeling that they must keep moving. Presently their searchlight picked up another trail; they followed it for five miles, only to see it sink as the others had done, into the prairie.

"I'm done," said Fleming, wearily. "I own up that I don't know where we are. We'll have to camp here for the night."

After they had looked in vain for water they fried some bacon over a fire of dry sage brush and rolled themselves in their blankets to sleep the uneasy sleep of men unaccustomed to using the ground as a mattress. Across the starlit spaces the unearthly yelp

of a coyote startled them at intervals from their sleep. The darkness deepened to the black hour before the dawn; and then a somber gray light stole over the prairie. It had lightened to a line of scarlet at the horizon before Fleming woke, with a painful stiffness in all his joints.

The first thing he saw, after rubbing the sleep from his eyes, was a thin line of smoke rising apparently not more than three miles to the north of them. It was moving slowly east and could mean only one thing—a locomotive. Sid was wakened without ceremony; their blankets were thrown into the tonneau and the car was put at the best speed possible towards this cheering sign of civilization.

"I never saw anything that looked so good to me," said Johnston as they sighted a siding of the Union Pacific. In the pink morning light smoke was rising from a section boss's house; the boss himself stood looking after an engine and caboose which vanished in the distance. The section boss's wife said they sure could have breakfast; and never had the voice of woman sounded a pleasanter note.

They learned from the section boss that they were thirty miles west of Laramie. In their nocturnal ramble they had skirted Sheep

Mountain; and zigzagged nearly the distance to Medicine Bow, which now lay fifty miles to the north of them. When asked to explain the mystifying behavior of the trails they had followed during the night, the section boss laughed.

"They wasn't trails; anybody but a tenderfoot would know they was just old sheep-wagon tracks, made when the herders drove the sheep out in the fall. Of course they don't go anywhere—couldn't you tell that by the way they was worn?"

Fleming admitted he had not been able to do so; and he listened respectfully while the section boss and his wife piled directions upon him anent the trail to Medicine Bow. But he did not intend to dally any longer with so coquettish a thing as a trail. Medicine Bow lay to the north, and he had his compass. Keeping in sight a line of hills he knew to be Snowy Mountains, he struck bodly out across country. The difficulties of the way he found to be not inconsiderable, for numerous small streams vein the Elk Mountain country, fords are uncertain and often treacherous, and here and there a spring freshet has washed out gulches to the depth of twenty or thirty feet. Twice their windlass and cable came

into use; and once they crossed a deep and narrow canyon near a spur of the Union Pacific on two railroad ties.

It was early afternoon when, nearly exhausted, they sighted Elk Mountain rearing its head through the clear air. They were coming into the land of the antelope and prairie hen. Also the pervasive sage brush seemed with each mile to grow stronger and more difficult to dodge. At four o'clock they passed the tin cans and old boots which form the fringe of Medicine Bow.

Sunday night in Medicine Bow is a time of abandonment to all social delights. There is only one street in the "town," but wide open to this thoroughfare are the Happy Home saloon and others as skillfully named. Every sheep and cattle ranch for a vast circle around is hilariously represented. Tongues and pens have sung the "toughness" of this handful of saloons; no novel of Western life is complete without a chapter devoted to Medicine Bow; it has even been touched up for theatrical purposes. But to Fleming it seemed the forlornest place he had ever been in. In front of a wooden building which had a false front to represent a second story, a cowboy sprawled on his horse talking to a girl in a red shirt-

waist who leaned to him from a window under a sign bearing the legend:

"Hot lunch and bakery. Meals by the day or week."

There were so many saloons that Fleming wondered where the population lived. A languid individual or two leaned against the wooden fronts of these convivial centers; in the clean golden light of sunset everything seemed somnolently waiting. Then suddenly, as if the honk of his horn was a cue on the stage, the cowboy's bronco began to buck viciously and the street filled with men. The languid individual put his head in at a window and yelled:

"Hi, boys! here's another!"

Fleming had no time to reflect what "another" might mean before they were swarming over the car. They sat on the running board and piled six deep in the tonneau, clamoring for a ride. Fleming saw at once the uselessness of remonstrating with a crowd so uproariously bent on diversion. He asked if they were all there, and they pointed out the cowboy whose horse had taken him careering over the prairie at first sight of the car.

"Poor George! he'd like to ride with you,"

they said, "but he seems to be in a hurry. And the's two greasers in th' Happy Home that 're patchin' th'mselves up from a knife fight. They can't come; but we're all here. Now let her out a notch."

Fleming circled twice around town, spilling passengers at each sharp corner—an incident received with yells of delight by those who stuck on—and then drew up at what they informed him was the boarding-house.

The mistress of the boarding-house had a shrewd eye and an exaggerated pompadour. She was probably thirty, but life and the merciless winds of the West had served her ill; she looked forty. She welcomed Fleming with languid interest. Supper would be ready, she told him, in fifteen minutes. When he asked if he could have a room in which to clean up a bit, she looked offended, but showed him to a tiny bedroom opening off the long dining-room. On a pine stand there was a washbowl and a pitcher—probably the only ones in the house. The pitcher was empty, and as Mrs. Maguire returned with it full, she looked at him with a puzzled expression. Then she retired to the door, where she leaned, staring at him thoughtfully. She was plainly

not going to leave him to his ablutions; so Fleming poured water into the bowl and took some soap from his suitcase.

"The' was some soap in the dish," she said absently, "if them girls ain't used it all up." Fleming replied, but she did not hear him. She was turning over something in her mind.

"Where was you born?" she said presently. Fleming named his native town.

"I knew it!" she cried; and there was something in her tone that made Fleming turn to look at her. The hard lines of her face had melted into a hungry look; she came a step or two into the room.

"I was born there, too!" she said. "I knew I'd seen you before. You used to pass our place every day; that was ten years ago, but I'm a great hand fer faces. Say, who runs The Oasis now?"

Fleming could have laughed at the question, but for something pathetic and wistful in the woman's tone. He told her he had not been in his native town for some years and was ignorant of the present ownership of the famous saloon. He asked why she wished to know.

"My father used to run The Oasis!" she declared, and it was as if she said her father

had been Mayor, or president of the bank. "Yes, indeed, we owned The Oasis, and it was the swellest place in town then. Fixtures an' pictures all brought from New York. Say, do you know what's become of Fritz's place —next the theater? And Jimmy Burk— d'you know him?—how's he doing?"

She pushed her pompadour back from a face that had become all at once alive with interest, and sat down on the edge of the bed.

For half an hour she questioned Fleming about her native town, and old acquaintances in that shady stratum of society which she evidently looked back upon as a lost paradise. She talked, with her hungry eyes fixed upon Fleming's face, until the increasing rattle of dishes in the dining-room brought her out of the past.

"I gotta see about supper," she said. At the door she turned back with an air of apology which sat oddly on her defiant face.

"This place I'm runnin' ain't The Oasis," she said; "but the best we've got is yours, Mr. Fleming."

At supper she proved her sincerity by an attention to himself and Johnston that brought down upon them the frankly cynical

amusement of the others at the long table. Under cover of a laugh at the expense of the red-haired waitress, Johnston told Fleming that he had run across Vannuccini's mechanic in the street. He had learned from him that the red car was standing, ready for departure, at the back of the boarding-house.

"Vannuccini got in here at noon," Sid informed him. "He was smart enough to get a cowboy in Cheyenne for pilot; that's how he beat us. But I got it out of Jarvis that he had to put in a new connecting rod, and while he was doing that Vannuccini skidded into one of those joints on the Boulevard out there—and he's there now."

"Roulette?"

"That's what it looks like. You'd ought to see Jarvis' phiz—he's wild."

Fleming pushed back his chair. "They tell me it's a good trail from here to Rawlins," he said thoughtfully. "How's the car?"

Johnston followed him to the door eagerly. "Say, let's slide out. There's going to be a moon; we could make Rawlins before daylight and be eighty miles to the good. Shall I bring the car around?"

Fleming considered; but someone touched

him on the elbow. The mistress of the boarding-house leaned in the doorway. For a feminine reason she had made a toilet and looked a year or two younger in a white shirt waist with a red bow at her throat.

"Is that a friend of yours over in Monte's place?" she asked.

She put the question casually, but she lowered her voice as she did so.

"The Italian?" said Fleming.

"The fellow that come in the red automobile," she returned. "If he's a friend of yours, you'd better get him out of Monte's place. He's been playing there since he blew in here—and he don't lose like a man has to if he wants to be popular out here. The boys" (she looked over her shoulder into the dining-room), "they've fixed it to have a little fun with him to-night—and the boys ain't gentle when they once get started."

Fleming reflected: could he call Vannuccini a friend of his?

"We could make pretty good use of an eighty-mile start, Mr. Fleming," said Johnston at his elbow.

From where he stood Fleming could see the road to Rawlins stretching towards the fading light of the west. He looked over his shoul-

der at the noisy crowd that was gulping down its last cup of coffee at the long table; they certainly did not look gentle.

"Yes," he said slowly, "I guess you can call Vannuccini a friend of mine. Which way is Monte's place?"

CHAPTER IX

PLAYING opposite to Vannuccini in Monte's place was a one-eyed man, an excellent understudy to Captain Hook. His one eye—small and of an icy blue —observed Fleming when he entered the place; if the others at the table saw him likewise, they made no sign. Vannuccini had evidently got past seeing or hearing anything around him. He played with an intense absorption in the game, silently, and with the true gambler's avidity. If, as the mistress of the boarding-house hinted, he had been losing during the afternoon, he was plainly ahead of the game now. The chips were stacked at his elbow, and there was something in the ugly hump of the croupier's shoulders that told Fleming the luck was not all with the West.

Fleming asked for a drink at the bar and looked around him. Just behind Vannuccini the bartender had lighted a kerosene lamp and pulled a pair of dirty red curtains over the front window. Fleming noticed there was another uncurtained window at the side of

the room, just back of the dealer. In the corner nearest the bar two Mexicans and a cowboy were at the crap table; the men from the boarding-house strolled in by twos and threes. Fleming was wondering where Jarvis was, when he caught a glance that passed between the croupier and the one-eyed man. It was plainly a signal. The latter leaned back in his chair and yawned.

"Oh, me gran'mother!" he said. "This is a slow game!"

Fleming moved carelessly around till he stood with his back to the window. The room had grown suddenly quiet. There followed a conversation between the one-eyed man and the dealer in the jargon of the cattle country which everyone in the room, except the Easterners, understood. Fleming could make out only its tone—which was not complimentary. The cowboys from the boarding-house pressed closer and laughed uproariously as he of the one eye drawled:

"Shall we vend his brand, boys?"

Vannuccini had waited with Latin politeness for the game to go on. He now rapped sharply on the table as he intimated that he covered the cloth.

"Oh, you do, do you?" said the man oppo-

site. "Well, I guess maybe you don't dast!" The palpable insult would have warned anyone but a rank outsider that the room was playing him for a fight. But Vannuccini only stared. His black eyes were brilliant with anger. He was at least no coward. He rapped sharply on the table with his big seal ring, and said:

"You lie, sir!"

There was only a second between that remark and the uproar that followed, but in that instant Fleming was aware that the window had been thrown up from the outside and a voice whispered at his back, sharply:

"Get down! they're goin' to shoot up the lights!"

Fleming dropped to the floor instinctively; and over his head the room resounded with the crack of six-shooters as the three lamps in the place crashed into darkness. Amidst the hubbub Fleming heard an Italian oath; he threw himself toward it through a tangle of legs. Vannuccini was in his leathers just as he had driven in that afternoon, and Fleming knew him at once when he touched his arm. The Italian had put his back to the wall and was striking out valiantly right and left. Fleming seized his arm and called him by name,

telling him to make for the window. In the flash from a six-shooter, whose discharge shattered the top panes of their window, Fleming saw the mistress of the boarding-house. She looked merely anxious and not at all frightened. In the uproar and confusion Fleming crouched down and made his way close by the wall to the window. Before the next pistol shot he was shoving Vannuccini outside. The mistress of the boarding-house was at their side instantly.

"You gotta run for it," she said; "come on this way."

They followed her in the darkness through the back premises of a second saloon and thus to the rear of the boarding-house. While they were yards away Fleming heard the purr of his motor and knew that Johnston was ready for them. They had barely reached the Nero when they heard the yells and drunken laughter of the crowd in Monte's place as it burst out into the street. There was a crescendo note in their merriment that told their direction plainly.

"You'd better move on," said the mistress of the boarding-house. "Run through that vacant lot there and you'll strike the street ahead of the gang."

Without ceremony Fleming pushed Vannuccini, who was swearing Italian vengeance and shaking his fist toward the sound of the approaching enemy, into the tonneau of the Nero. As he followed he pressed some money into the woman's hand with a hasty word of thanks for her intervention. But before he had thrown in the clutch she had climbed on the running board and was pushing the money back into his hand.

"I don't want it," she gasped—"not from you—you knew The Oasis."

She had dropped off and slipped into the darkness before Fleming could speak. In an instant they were bumping over the vacant lot toward the street, and the yells of their late friends sounded at their back. Fleming looked behind and saw that Jarvis had slipped out from the shadow of a house with the red car and was close at their heels. The crowd from Monte's place saw him just as he was vanishing into the dark at the fringe of the town. With a whoop of chagrin they emptied their guns in his direction and made a rush for their horses. Their shots nicked the paint from the red Superba and whistled over the head of the unfortunate Jarvis. Truly, as the mistress of the boarding-house

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had said, the boys were not gentle when they started out for fun.

Fleming threw in his high speed, for in spite of the fact that it appeared on the surface a drunken joke, he realized that there had been something more than fun in the atmosphere of Monte's place. What provocation Vannuccini might have given them he did not know, but from all appearances he had succeeded in stirring up a great deal of the latent ire of Medicine Bow.

When the lights of the town twinkled small behind them, Fleming stopped and Vannuccini climbed into his own car. There had been very little conversation as they proceeded. Vannuccini, snug and safe in the tonneau, had murmured, "My poor mechanic!" as he heard the gamesome gun play behind him; but it did not seem to occur to him to utter thanks for his own deliverance from what might have proved a joke with a serious ending.

He descended, when Fleming intimated that he might do so safely, with a suave word of acknowledgment for the use of Fleming's car. Then he climbed to his seat, took the wheel from Jarvis, and with a polite "Permit me!" drove ahead of the Nero and whizzed off into the darkness.

Johnston threw himself back with a moan of disgust. "Say," he exclaimed, "wouldn't you think he'd have the decency to give us the road when you've just pulled him out of a mix-up like that!"

Fleming said nothing, but his face went white under its sunburn. He savagely pressed down on the throttle till the staunch little car was bouncing over the decidedly indifferent road at a rattling pace. The great harvest moon came up and flooded the plain with its unreal white light; ahead of them, growing very gradually smaller, and now and then going out altogether as a dip in the trail hid it, they could see the powerful searchlight of the big Superba. A coyote barked from a distant bluff; once they descended into a wide, saucerlike valley where in the moonlight a thousand head of cattle lay. An hour before the dawn they reached Rawlins, where they allowed themselves six hours for rest and the overhauling of the car.

Bending over his map in the Ferris Hotel at Rawlins, Fleming remarked to his mechanic that judging from the number of towns scattered along the Union Pacific they would have no difficulty getting gasolene and water on the next stage of their journey. A keen-

eyed, long-legged man in a sombrero and a rusty frock coat sat near them, frankly listening to their conversation. When Fleming's remark about the towns along the Union Pacific came to his ear he slouched down in his chair, spat in the general direction of a cuspidor, and shook with inward laughter. Presently he leaned over the arm of his chair and said in a gentle, Southern drawl:

"Stranger, ah you-all acquainted with the Union Pacific?"

Fleming admitted a mere bowing acquaintance with that road.

"Ah thought you-all was some ignorant," the man in the sombrero went on; he rose and traced with a long forefinger the line from Rawlins to Granger.

"Fillmore—Latham," he read, and chuckled again. "They look right cute on the map, don't they? But they ahn't what you'd call *towns;* nor yet hamlets. Why, my son, between here an' Rock Springs—that's 130 miles—there ahn't enough folks to make up a prayer meetin' or a lynchin' bee. Those cute towns on the map ah' sidings, or a water-tank or a cattle shute, except where they're written down playful like to fill up the map. Wamsutter, now, is a metropolis. The's

thirty people in Wamsutter, if you count 'em all. Bitter Creek, a little further along, crowds it ha'd with a population of five. The rest of those names are mostly to ornament the map. Yes, suh, if you're travelin' through the Bitter Creek country, my advice to you is not to depend on those map towns. Carry yo' own water an' grub an' then yo' ahn't goin' to be disappointed when yo' expect a busy mart an' find a sign with the name of a town painted on it—an' nothin' mo'!"

This light on the next stage of their journey they found to be of the greatest value. When they slipped out of Rawlins at eleven that morning, the Nero carried gasolene and water to its fullest capacity. Every bolt and nut had been tightened; the engine and running gear had been looked to; the car was put into ship-shape condition. The commissary department was reinforced by more canned tomatoes, and extra blankets were added, for they had already discovered that the nights at an altitude of seven thousand feet are as cold as the noons are warm.

Not many miles west from Rawlins the soil becomes distinctly saline; not even the indomitable sage brush will grow here; in its place

spring up clumps of greasewood and saltsage. The desert begins.

Fleming had determined to make Point of Rocks that night. He knew he had the start of Vannuccini out of Rawlins; if no accidents occurred and he could hold his advantage he felt confident he could keep the lead through the mountains that were ahead of him. After a careful study of the map he decided to risk leaving the railroad. Even along the Union Pacific there was no trail worthy the name; if instead of following the dip of the railroad he steered by the compass straight across the Red Desert, he would save thirty miles.

It meant boldly striking out an unknown course through a region never crossed by an automobile before, but in his present frame of mind he felt a perfect willingness to risk any danger or hardship if he could keep ahead of the Superba. He put the matter to Sid Johnston, explaining the risks they ran in getting away from the railroad water supply.

"Sure!" said Johnston, "I know that; but I'd go thirsty any time to cut out that Dago now!"

They filled their radiator at a tank-car on a siding of the Union Pacific and adjusted their sand-tires. In ten minutes the railroad

was lost to sight; the Bitter Creek country lay before them.

Time was when a man, to prove his toughness, had only to assert that he came from Bitter Creek. Fleming understood the reason why after he had traversed that section of Wyoming with its endless miles of sand and saltsage and greasewood; empty, unproductive, trackless. At the edge of the desert Bitter Creek meanders, in the dry season a trickle of nauseous, alkaline water; after a rain a torrent deep enough to drown a man, but still undrinkable.

In the middle of the afternoon they had an unpleasant surprise—they discovered the trail of another automobile striking up from the south and then turning west, evidently with the intention of finding an easy pass between a line of buttes which lay ahead of them. Fleming knew before he examined the tire tracks that it was the Superba. Vannuccini had probably left Rawlins immediately after them; apparently he had traveled south of their route and found better going, for though the trail was fresh and distinct, he must be at least five miles ahead of them. In grim silence they settled down to the task of overtaking their rival.

The sun was beginning to slant across the desert and Point of Rocks was thirty miles south of them, when they again sighted the red car. They were skirting a small but steep butte when it occurred to Fleming to climb to the top and reconnoiter. With a field glass he was able to sweep ten miles of flat sand, lying between him and Black Rock Butte. As he did so, something seemed to disengage itself from the tawny sand, and to move, a bright spot against the background of the distant butte. The next instant the sun glittered back as from polished metal; and Fleming knew he was looking at his rival's car.

But what he could not understand, as he gazed through his readjusted glasses, was that there seemed to be three people out there in the desert. Johnston climbed the butte and said it looked to him as if Vannuccini had met a sheepman or cowboy.

"But I don't see any horse," said Fleming, and then hastily made his way back to his car, for the glass showed him that the Superba was swinging on its way once more.

"Whoever the third fellow was," said Johnston, as Fleming threw in his high speed and followed in the track of the car ahead, "they've left him there."

He leveled the glass at a spot near the base of the butte, then suddenly he leaned forward across the dash-board with an exclamation of astonishment.

"Oh, crackey," he whistled; "it isn't a man —*it's a girl!*"

CHAPTER X

SHE stood out, a lonely figure against the fantastic background of the butte, facing the approaching car. Fleming thought as he looked at her that he had never seen a figure so finely poised, so perfectly still, and yet alert. A slight breeze had sprung up across the desert; it caught her scanty skirt and a lock of her black hair, blowing them back until she was like a small Victory—done in olive and black. She was very dark. Fleming thought at first she was Indian; but at a second glance he knew better; she might be Spanish, or even Italian, with her beautiful straight nose, her fine eyebrows, and her complexion of a sort of dusky pallor. She made no sound as they approached; she merely held up one hand with a gesture that Johnston said afterward would have stopped the Empire State. There was something so foreign about her that Fleming unconsciously spoke very distinctly.

"Do you speak English?" he said as he stopped the car.

The slightest curve appeared at the corner of her lips.

"I sure do," she replied. Fleming was amused and apologetic.

"Can I be of any assistance? Where is your horse?" he added.

The girl pointed southwest. "He's back there in an arroyo. He shied at a jack rabbit and backed over with me—I had to shoot him," she added simply.

"And since then you've——"

"Footed it," she said. Fleming stared. Even he, a tenderfoot, knew something of the horror of losing a horse in that trackless and desolate country. But this girl stood there with the air of a young stoic and told a story of courage and endurance that was a revelation of the spirit of the West.

"I wanted to get to Myricks," she said; and Fleming learned that "Myricks" was forty miles north of where they had met her, at the foot of the Continental Divide, over a line of buttes and across an abomination of desolation called an "alkali flat." She had started at daybreak the day before from a little settlement on the Union Pacific to ride to Myricks. Her bronco, so she said, could have made the distance—a matter of some

fifty miles—before dark, if the accident had not occurred.

"I just had to foot it," she finished.

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Fleming, "why didn't you turn back? You had only gone a quarter of the distance; you could more easily have walked back than have gone on, couldn't you?"

For the first time the girl looked confused. She dug a little pit in the sand with one toe exactly as a naughty child would have done, and when she looked up her black eyes held a sullen fire.

"I wanted to go to Myricks," she repeated, doggedly.

Fleming forbore to question her further; but there was something in the affair he did not understand. When he asked why Vannuccini had not taken her in her eyes flashed and she drew herself up defiantly.

"He would have took me on to Rock Springs!" she cried.

"And you didn't want to go to Rock Springs?"

She shook her head emphatically, "No!"

"And because you wouldn't go in his direction he left you here—on foot, in the desert!"

"Oh, he knew you was behind him. He said you'd take me in if I waited."

"Thoughtful of him, I'm sure," Fleming said. "How did he know I wouldn't branch off his trail before I reached you? What would you have done then?"

The girl stared off across the desert to where the foothills of the Continental Divide showed a purple hue against the western sky.

"I should have kept on till I dropped," she said; and Fleming noticed how pallid her face had grown in contrast to the purple black of her hair.

"Well," he returned, with a hasty cheerfulness, "I am here—so jump in. I must make Point of Rocks in two hours. From there you can notify your friends——"

He stopped, amazed, for the girl had turned on her heel and was walking straight out into the desert again. For an instant he stared, and then he stalked after her, put his hand with scant ceremony on her arm and forced her to face him.

"Look here, young woman," he said, "this is no pleasure trip I'm on. It is extremely important to me not to go a single mile out of my way. You propose that I make a detour of some fifty miles to take you to your friends

—and you are unwilling to give me a single sensible reason for doing so. Do you call that fair?"

The girl's eyes widened in a startled stare. Then suddenly, to Fleming's consternation, she became, instead of a young stoic, a passionate Latin, her face on fire, her hands clutching him, her story poured out in the vivid vernacular of the West.

It became plain from the incoherent facts tumbling over each other that she had good reason to resist being carried back to Point of Rocks, for somewhere in that immediate vicinity a bridegroom and a bridal party were scouring the country for a missing bride. She was the bride; and from her frantic assertions the would-be groom was altogether detestable, loathsome and not to be borne!

"I would walk till I dropped in my tracks!" she cried, "to get out of marrying that Miguel! I said 'No' every day for three months, but my aunt (she's plumb *stuck* on Miguel!) did everything. She called the priest, she made the clothes, she got up a supper! Oh, she drove me crazy! I just hit the trail for Myricks!"

"Hm-m," said Fleming; "where were your parents all this time?"

The girl shrugged a disdainful shoulder. She made it clear to Fleming that the masterful aunt was the real arbiter of her destiny. Parents there were, and they lived in a vague region known as the Little Snake; but they had given her into the hands of the aunt to be sent to school, and, evidently, safely married off.

The girl's only disinterested friends appeared to be Mr. and Mrs. Myrick, whose present abode was a sheep wagon in the foothills of the Divide. Towards this haven she had set her face,—and, as Fleming could see, she had set it with a reckless and passionate determination.

Fleming and Sid looked helplessly at each other. This was worse than a burnt-out connecting rod! Fleming grew hot with rage as he thought of Vannuccini speeding westward after having adroitly shifted the burden of a runaway bride onto his rival's shoulders. He knew that only the losing course was open to him, but he would not give up without one more effort.

"You won't go on with me to Point of Rocks?" he asked the girl.

"I can't," she said wearily. "You run along," she added, with a hint of scorn in her

voice. "I'll foot it till I hit the old trail—mebbe I'll meet someone——"

"Don't talk nonsense," said Fleming sharply. He made room for her amidst the supplies in the tonneau. "Now then, climb in! And point out the quickest way to this Myrick place, please."

Sid Johnston's face was a study in chagrin as he pointed the car due north. But he was curious also, and ten minutes after they had left their westward course he stole a look at their passenger. Immediately he threw out the clutch and ran around to the door of the tonneau. The girl lay huddled on a pile of tarpaulin in the bottom of the car, unconscious.

The two men looked at each other with speechless dismay. Fleming was the first to recover himself. With an exclamation of pity he lifted out the girl's limp form. Sid frantically plunged into the tonneau for brandy; they managed between them to give her a swallow of the stimulant, and in a few minutes her eyes slowly opened.

Fleming was not aware of the kindness and pity in his gaze as he bent over her, but the girl evidently saw it, for to his intense embarrassment she seized his hand and put it to her cheek. He could feel her tears upon it.

"You are awful good to me," she said weakly.

"Nonsense! Look here—when did you eat last?"

"Yesterday, about noon," she replied, struggling to her feet. "I guess that's why I'm so wobbly. But I'm all right now——"

"Why, she's starved!" Sid exclaimed, his susceptible heart touched to the depths. With a face of wild concern he began to forage among the supplies. Fleming helped him, and in a few minutes they had the satisfaction of seeing the color come back to their protégé's face with food and drink. She was touchingly grateful; with a gay and child-like manner she took them into her confidence as she ate. Her name, she told them, was Jacinta; her mother was Spanish and her father a Missourian—rather no-account, she added frankly.

She seemed to Fleming a pathetic incongruity, in her shabby corduroy riding habit, with her pretty, finely cut dark face and her Western slang. She had the Latin sense of the picturesque, too; for her scarlet handkerchief was knotted to show her fine throat, and the sombrero she wore was exactly the right frame for her vivid face.

It amused him to see the unconscious

daughter of Eve come out in her as she regained her spirits.

But in the midst of their impromptu meal she stopped, looked at the sky and listened an instant· and then she rose hurriedly to her feet.

"We'd better hit the trail quick," she said. "There's a big storm coming up over the Divide."

At that moment only a native could have predicted such a thing. The sky was still clear and there was little wind. But presently, over their heads, the wind began to sing; across the desert the dust rose in little eddying columns.

Jacinta, who was riding beside Fleming, the better to serve as guide, pointed out these dancing columns.

"There's going to be a big sand storm," she commented briefly.

In half an hour they were feeling the full force of her prophecy. They had made perhaps fifteen miles to the north when Fleming stopped the car and insisted on Jacinta retiring into the tonneau. In the last quarter of an hour the wind had risen to an incredible gale; the noise of it was like a storm at sea. It scooped up the fine alkali dust and sand

from the desert, scattering it broadcast. It filled the air till the car moved in a yellow twilight; their faces were stung by the pelting of the sand as if by fine whiplashes. In spite of goggles it became at last an almost unbearable agony to keep their eyes open.

For a few miles Fleming kept grimly at the steering wheel. By shielding his face with one arm he was able to keep going, though it had become impossible to see more than the car's length ahead in that maelstrom of flying sand. When the pain of the stinging particles became unendurable, he gave the wheel to Johnston and retired to catch his breath under a tarpaulin.

Even with his head thus muffled he could hear the increased roar of the wind. Presently he looked out, to find that the twilight had given place to a tumultuous night, through which they labored like a bark in a heavy sea. In the uproar he had to put his head close to Johnston's to make him hear. At that moment the storm seemed to reach its climax of fury.

With one accord Fleming and Johnston retired under the car, where they lay, partially sheltered, digging the sand from their eyes.

As they lay there Fleming could see the sand columns rising from the ground, wheeling, advancing like furious battalions, then springing into the air, to be dispersed as snow is driven before the wind. But very shortly his view was cut off by a drift of sand which was steadily, inch by inch, piling itself against the car. In an hour they would be completely buried where they lay; and in three, the car itself would be engulfed.

Fleming crawled out from their shelter, and Johnston followed. Armed with the shovel and a tin pail they fell to work at the drifts which already were piling up to the body of the car. In spite of their remonstrance Jacinta also appeared from her retreat in the tonneau and fell to work on the drifts with the frying pan.

When he once more took the steering wheel, Fleming's face was set. He had made up his mind that if any human being could do it, he would keep the car going. For an hour they rode in silence. For Fleming there was one comparatively bright spot in the general gloom of his outlook; his pet sand-tires were proving all that he had claimed for them. Without them the car could not have made a rod in that welter of sand. He turned over

in his mind the advertisement he would work up for his sand-tires when he got back to the factory; and then the reflection smote him that his share in that factory was being imperiled at the rate of twenty miles an hour—the time Vannuccini was probably making at that moment toward the setting sun. He bent desperately over the steering wheel. The car made a short spurt over a spot swept clean by the wind; for an instant he saw a deeper line of darkness amidst the swirl of the sand; then just behind him Jacinta seized his shoulder and screamed.

The next instant the front of the car lurched downward sickeningly; Fleming was hurled across the steering wheel; and the earth seemed flying up to met him. He was conscious of a yell from Johnston—and then the car dropped, dropped, through a nightmare of darkness at the bottom of which something hit him a violent blow. He knew one second of excruciating pain; and then he seemed to plunge again into abysmal depths.

CHAPTER XI

"OH, I can't do it!" the girl cried. "Couldn't you do it? It isn't hard —you just give it a sharp pull, until you feel the bone slip into place——"

She stopped with a shudder and looked at Sid Johnston. In the light from the fire Sid was of a delicate saffron, and plainly in an awful state of funk.

"My Gawd!" he groaned, "I couldn't set a chicken's leg. You'll have to do it, Jacinta. Look at my hand shake."

The girl's face paled. She straightened up from her crouching position over the fire and walked around it to where Fleming lay stretched on the cushions of the car. There were beads of perspiration on his forehead in spite of the chill of early morning, and his eyes were bright with fever. One arm lay oddly outstretched on the cushions. The girl winced as she looked at it.

"It's got to be done," she said to herself. She had once seen two cow-punchers set a dislocated shoulder, but it was another thing to do it herself. She felt herself getting sick

and dizzy, and she looked a last appeal at Sid. He had disappeared into the darkness; she could hear him swearing nervously behind a rock at the other end of the gulley. She gently put aside the coat and shirt they had slit two hours before when they first examined Fleming's injury. The shoulder was becoming inflamed. Fleming had sunk into a painful doze.

"It's got to be done," she said again, and called Sid. "Put your knee there, under the arm," she commanded. "Now hold his other shoulder down, hard; don't let him move."

Very gently, but with hands as firm as steel, she moved the arm until she felt the bone slip back into its socket, then she stood up, trembling. But her surgery had been effective; when they brought Fleming back to consciousness he no longer raved of disasters and a lost race, but demanded to know where he was and what had happened.

"You're at the bottom of a fifteen-foot arroyo," Jacinta informed him. "And you're to keep still, and don't talk."

Fleming shut his eyes; he was afraid to ask about the car. At last he looked at Johnston, who knelt on the ground beside him.

"Is it all up with us, Sid?" he whispered.

A grin swept over Johnston's anxious face. "Oh, Lord, no!" he said.

"You never saw the beat of that car for standing a bruising, Mr. Fleming. Broke off one lamp and smashed a mudguard and running board; snapped the truss rod, knocked the steering gear a point or two to larboard, and ripped off a tire—but otherwise she's all righto! I'm going to get to work at her just as soon as it's light; don't you worry."

"But, Sid—what's the matter with my shoulder?"

Jacinta appeared at that moment and begged him not to talk. He was going to have some hot coffee and then he was to rest so that he would have strength to be moved. An inviting program! Fleming turned his face to the big boulder at the foot of which he lay and his heart was like lead within him. His shoulder was one burning ache; and his head was exceedingly queer. He heard Jacinta and Sid talking as they prepared their breakfast; the fire of dry sage brush crackled cheerfully at his back, and presently he saw the red light of sunrise creep into the arroyo.

Then he remembered Vannuccini. With a feverish effort he twisted himself onto his uninjured arm and half arose. He saw Jacinta

run toward him. Her arm about him was the last thing he remembered before he plunged once more into the depths of unconsciousness.

After an anxious conference it was decided that Fleming should be got to the Myricks' as soon as possible. As morning dawned, Jacinta was able to get her bearings, and she declared they were not more than five miles from the sheep-wagons. While she packed up the cooking outfit and looked after Fleming, Sid had been working at the car to such good effect that about noon he announced they could go on. At the lower end of the arroyo he was able to make an ascent to the level of the desert; between them they managed to get Fleming into the car; and driving very carefully they made out, an hour later, the first foothills of the Divide.

A morning of sunshine and breeze had succeeded the tempestuous evening; presently they saw a grayish blur, like a cloud shadow, drifting with a movement almost imperceptible across the hills. It was the sheep, three thousand of them, grazing slowly northward. Two miles farther and the white canvas of the sheep-wagons gleamed out in a snug fold of the hills.

Living in a sheep-wagon breeds the laconic habit of a lighthouse keeper. The Myricks said little and asked no questions, but their hospitality was of the very best brand. They bore Fleming into the "bedroom" of the second wagon with an instant kindness that won his heart, and then Mrs. Myrick proceeded to cook them a dinner that lived in Sid Johnston's memory for days to come.

It was Mrs. Myrick's opinion that Fleming ought to have a doctor. As far as they could tell, the shoulder had been set well enough; but there was a mounting fever, and Fleming was continually dropping off into a state of semi-consciousness, in which he talked wildly of the race and begged them to start on at once.

"There's Doc Chanler at Rock Springs," said Jacinta. But the Myricks looked at each other dubiously.

"The fellers on Petersen's ranch are layin' fer him," said Myrick. "I dunno whether he'll dast to come up into these parts er not. 'Count of the shindig around Seaton's Pass," he added. Jacinta evidently understood the reference.

"He'll come," she said decidedly. "Who'll go for him?"

She looked at Johnston. Sid tried to appear cheerful.

"How many blocks is it?" he asked.

"Thirty miles from here to Point of Rocks," replied Jacinta.

"If you go straight," added the sheepman.

Sid was of the opinion that alone he would be hopelessly lost inside of five miles; it was clear that he must have a guide. Myrick himself could not go; Mrs. Myrick did not know the trail through the foothills; there was only Jacinta left.

Her eyes widened with dismay as she took in the situation. Point of Rocks meant for her a return to a dangerous locality. Somewhere in the vicinity raged the dreaded aunt and disappointed bridegroom. But here, under her eyes, lay Fleming, suffering and in need of help; and in her heart was the memory of a certain look of pity and kindness he had given her. Jerry was not to know till afterward the lively part in his affairs his unconscious tenderness toward the little runaway bride was to play. He lay just now in a feverish sleep. Jacinta looked once at his flushed face and then she said:

"We'd better hit the trail if we're to get back here to-night."

Afterwards, Sid Johnston was able to describe his run for the doctor with a spirit that would have done credit to the ride of Paul Revere. But at the time his heart was as water within him. Bereft of Fleming's knowledge and resource, the mechanic developed a strange sort of a stage fright. In these desolate and forbidding wastes objects lose their perspective and become after a time hallucinatory. Twice that afternoon Johnston threw out the clutch and brought the car to a standstill because of what he supposed to be a dog or a coyote in the way. When he had brushed his hand over his eyes, the thing disappeared and only the undulating sand with its patches of saltsage or clumps of greasewood stretched before him. At his right ran the sandhills, some of them fantastically shaped as if molded by the gigantic forces of the upper air. Once they ran for miles at the edge of an alkali "flat"—the dry bed of some prehistoric lake, in the caked alkaline dust of which no living thing can exist. And always about them were the dead silences of the desert.

Jacinta, who knew every fold of the foothills, every butte and basin between the sheep country and Point of Rocks, was an excellent

guide. She used her knowledge so skillfully that three hours after they left the sheep-wagons they saw a thin line of smoke on the eastern horizon. It was a westward-bound passenger train on the Union Pacific; and five minutes later they sighted the half dozen houses which is Point of Rocks.

It was decided on account of Jacinta's shyness about being seen in "town" that she should wait in the car a short distance east of the station while Johnston went on to the doctor's house. When she heard the incoming train she hid behind the car, making herself small on the off running board. Thus she was not aware that the automobile, a conspicuous object amidst the sand and sage brush, was arousing considerable interest among the passengers at the windows of the last Pullman.

As the train stopped to take on water at the tank east of the station a very pretty girl sat alone on the observation platform of the last Pullman. Her position brought the lonely blue motor in a direct line with her preoccupied gaze. She looked at it casually, once. Then she rose to her feet and stared; then she opened the door of the vestibule swiftly, and ran across the intervening stretch of sand towards the motor car.

The next instant, without a note of warning or farewell, the train glided silently away from the water tank, swept through Point of Rocks and became a lesson in perspective across the desert. No one heard the startled cry of the pretty girl in gray except an equally pretty girl in brown corduroy and leather who started up from the opposite side of the car and said:

"Who are you?"

CHAPTER XII

ON the day when Fleming prepared for his run across the Wyoming desert Betty and her father had arrived in Hanna, thirty miles east. Their presence there was a tribute to Betty's power of inveiglement. She had begun by exhibiting a sudden enthusiastic curiosity concerning her father's mining interests in Wyoming. Then, when he remained unfired by her zeal, she had taxed him with a reprehensible lack of business spirit. At last one morning Hiram D. Albright had looked across the table at his Betty with an expression that started out to be severe and was spoilt by a chuckle.

"I never saw your beat for hanging onto an idea, Betty!" he had said. "If you'll give me a rest on the subject of mines I'll buy two tickets to Portland to-morrow."

Thereupon she had run around the table and hugged him ecstatically.

"There's no sense in it, though," he had added, trying not to look as if he liked being managed by Betty. "I don't know why a girl

should take so much interest in an auto race, any way. When I was young, girls——"

But as before in their arguments he had never got beyond this point, for Betty always put her pretty hand over his mouth and stopped him. She had for some mysterious, girl's reason set her heart on being in Portland for the end of the transcontinental race, and, being her father's "one fair daughter," she had, as usual, had her way.

They were in Hanna two days. Betty's father said that if he had been dragged out there on a pretense of looking at coal mines, he was going to do it; and Betty could make the best of Hanna's one hotel for a couple of days.

The first day she had found Hanna rather diverting; but the second dragged. When the Eastern mail came in at noon, her father had not got back from Mine No. 7; but she found distraction in the letters that had followed them from New York. On the heels of this post came a telegram, also forwarded, which Betty read and turned scarlet over.

It was a telegram from Vannuccini, dated Monday (this was Tuesday) and sent to her in New York from Rock Springs, Wyoming.

When she had finished it she sat for several

minutes staring at it. In all her unclouded life Betty Albright had never known so many conflicting emotions. She was deeply hurt; she was mortified; and she told herself she was dreadfully angry. But there was another expression in her eyes. It was as if a shock had revealed to her an emotion she had not dreamed herself capable of harboring. For the first time in her favored and happy existence Betty Albright was jealous.

When Vannuccini composed his telegram to Miss Albright he had not the least idea that it might prove for him a boomerang. He had obeyed a primitive law of cunning when he inserted a cleverly casual sentence in that telegram to the effect that Fleming had gone off somewhere into the wilds with a beautiful Spanish girl!

He had not stated it so badly as that. His lengthy wire was effective more by what it left out than by what it revealed. But in spite of its cunning it worked for the absolute downfall of its author. Betty Albright was too honest herself to tolerate treachery for an instant; but, alas, she rose to the bait! That was where she showed herself at one with the Eternal Feminine. She would never forgive Vannuccini for his tale-bearing; but to the

tale itself she paid a most inconsistent attention. It came as a positive shock to find that she could be so stung by anything Jerry Fleming might do. Ever since they were boy and girl she had accepted Jerry's unswerving loyalty as a matter of course. By all his boyish love-making she had never been stirred; but now at this hint of Vannuccini's she found herself regarding Fleming with eyes, as it were, wide open. Had he become more interesting?

The hot tears of rage and shame sprang to her eyes. But for whom were they? Herself, or Vannuccini, or Fleming? She herself could not have told, but she knew that some instinct moved her to tear Vannuccini's telegram into fragments as she heard her father's voice below. Whatever she herself might think of the affair, it would be unbearable to have her father believe that Jerry had run away with a pretty Spaniard. If the story was true, then she would have to own that her father's lack of confidence in Jerry was justified; but she meant to put off the humiliating moment as long as possible.

That afternoon they had set out once more on their westward way. An abstracted silence fell on Betty. She sat staring out at the monotonous flying miles of desert country;

her father retired under a large white handkerchief and went to sleep. Presently she slipped out to the observation platform of their coach. She was quite alone on the platform, and she selected a comfortable chair with the determination to think of nothing but "The Ebb-tide," which she was reading for the second time. She told herself there was probably not a word of truth in that story of Jerry and the pretty senorita . . . anyway, she wouldn't think about it . . . of course, she had always known that Jerry was impetuous . . .

Just here she was aware that the train had come to a standstill. She looked out across the desert. Then she sprang to her feet with an exclamation of surprise. She recognized the blue car, standing apparently deserted out there among the sage brush. The train had stopped to take on water; there would be time for her to just run across to the car and surprise Jerry. Without a second thought she had opened the door of the vestibule and was speeding toward the motor car.

CHAPTER XIII

WHEN Sid Johnston came back from his quest of the doctor he advanced around the Union Pacific water tanks whistling cheerfully, a pail of water in one hand and a five-gallon gasolene tin in the other. When he was within a stone's throw of the car, he suddenly set down his burden and retired behind a clump of sage brush, where he doubled up with silent mirth. For he recognized the Only Girl at once; and in spite of the astonishing unexpectedness of her appearance there he grasped in part the nature of the little comedy before him.

The Nero held the center of the stage. Standing defiantly on the right running board of the car was Jacinta; and facing her was Betty Albright. There was that in the air which made Johnston feel backward about intruding. Plainly there had been an exchange of "Who are you's?" The girl from the East looked at the girl from the Little Snake, and there were certain undeniable questions in her

stare. At this point Johnston came out from the shelter of his sage brush and advanced toward them. Betty came to meet him.

"You are Sid Johnston, aren't you?" she said with a smile that enrolled him under her banner at once. "I'm afraid I'm left on your hands. I recognized Mr. Fleming's car from the platform of the train and I thought I had plenty of time—to—where *is* Mr. Fleming?"

Sid had a fatal impulse to conceal their detour of the day before, which made him stammer suspiciously over the simple statement that Fleming lay thirty miles to the north with a dislocated shoulder.

"A dislocated shoulder!" gasped Betty. "Has he had a doctor?"

"That's what we came down here for," said Sid. "Oh, no, no—he's not so to say in danger, but he's off his head, and the fever, you see——"

Betty turned pale. "He might die! It should have been set at once——"

A sound from Jacinta made them turn to look at her. She still stood on the running board of the car, a small Carmen, with hostility in her beautiful eyes.

"*I* set it!" she said. It would be going too far to say that Betty wished the arm had never

been set; but she was quite human. A wave of conviction overwhelmed her reason. Vannuccini had been right! It was really too bad of Jerry! And after what he had said to her back there in New York . . .

"We'll have to hit the trail lively, if we get to Myricks before dark," Jacinta was saying. "The doctor'll be there before we are, for there's a shorter trail through the foothills."

"The doctor's going up on horseback," Sid explained. "We can take you to one of those houses over there, Miss Albright; and I'll wire your father where you are, if you say so."

He looked from Jacinta to Betty. Betty stared at the converging lines of steel rails stretching away across the desert; then she stole one glance at Jacinta's Castilian prettiness and announced that she did not care to be left at Point of Rocks—she had decided it was her duty to go along and nurse poor Jerry!

Sid stared helplessly. He ventured to remind her of her distracted father. Betty admitted that there was a difficulty; but after a moment of frowning thought she had solved it. There was an operator in the station near at hand. They would send a wire to her father,

who would probably not miss her until the train reached the next station—Rock Springs. This wire would be handed him when the train stopped. In it she would explain fully; she would also tell him to await her at Rock Springs. To guard against the telegram's missing him a similar one should be sent to the hotel where they had intended spending the day while Mr. Albright looked after mining affairs in the vicinity.

"Poor Dad!" Betty could not help smiling. "He'll be wild till one of those telegrams strikes him. He'll abuse everyone dreadfully, from the porter up; but I can't help it. You don't mind taking me along, do you, Mr. Johnston?"

Poor Sid did mind—and he didn't, when Betty smiled like that. But there was a terrible moment when he wondered which girl he ought to help to a seat beside the driver. He need not have troubled himself. Betty had recovered her aplomb. With quite a royal air she took her seat in front. And Jacinta, with a darkling brow, was obliged to make shift amidst the impedimenta of the tonneau.

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The canvas-covered sheep-wagons gleamed through a velvety dusk when Sid drove the

blue car around the last fold of the hills. The doctor's pony was hobbled with the other horses and a yellow gleam of light from one of the wagons showed Mrs. Myrick deftly manipulating the frying pans.

As Betty stepped from the car a swift sense of constraint seized her. All through that never-to-be-forgotten drive across the desert and through the foothills she had been telling herself that she came from a sense of duty; but she could not blind herself to a less worthy emotion that made itself felt whenever she looked at Jacinta. She despised herself for it, but the feeling was there—and it grew within her as Jacinta glided past her and climbed within the tiny door of the nearest wagon. She stood in the dark, beside the packing case that served as doorstep, and heard Fleming say:

"Hello, Jacinta—you're an all-right girl!"

She waited no longer. A lantern hung from one of the corner uprights and in its light she saw Fleming raise himself on one elbow with a look on his face as if he had seen an apparition.

"*Betty!*"

"Well, Jerry!" she replied, putting a cool hand on his forehead.

"Betty—dear! It isn't you, is it?"

Betty laughed. "It certainly is. Now—" with professional coolness, "you are to lie down again and I'll explain."

If Betty's eyes had not been clouded she would have been convinced of Jerry's loyalty by the rapturous happiness in his face as he regarded her. But circumstantial evidence has always a new trick up its sleeve. As she seated herself on the box at the head of Jerry's cot a figure stirred in the dark corner and crept toward the door.

"Wait!" Jerry called. "Jacinta, come here. Betty, dear, I want you to be good friends with this little girl. She's the real thing; she's got more courage than most men, Betty."

"I am sure she has," said Betty; and, manlike, Fleming took it for granted that Betty knew the entire episode. He promptly dismissed Jacinta and her story from his mind. It was enough for him that Betty sat there, that she allowed him to hold her hand in his free one—though with a detached coolness of which he was quite unconscious in the happiness of talking to her.

That night Betty slept for the first time with only canvas between her and the sky.

One wagon had been arranged for the women; and she could see through the doorway the wonderful Wyoming night sky. The stars hung miraculously near; out in the foothills a coyote barked, and in the distance another answered. That night and the day that followed were like bits of a dream existence. The limpid clearness of the air; the foothills undulating away endlessly; the afternoon siesta in the shade of the wagons—all were part of an experience the city-bred girl would never forget.

Fleming was much improved the next morning. Betty's coming, he declared, was better than all the doctors in the State. He would in fact have started on their way again at once if the rest of his party had not refused to hear of such a thing.

"If you were a cowpunch, Fleming," said the doctor, "you'd have set your own arm and gone on rejoicing; but you've got too much city in your bones to take liberties with a dislocation. If you don't fuss yourself into another fever over this race you think you've lost, you can go on to-morrow afternoon. I'll see you over the Divide myself—though I'm about as popular as a skunk at a picnic west of the hills!" he added, with a grin at Myrick.

Myrick nodded. "Better stay this side the Divide," he remarked.

"Well, I tell you," returned the doctor slowly, "when trouble is looking for me I want to go out to meet it—and get it over with —see?"

Jacinta looked up from the potatoes she was helping Mrs. Myrick prepare for supper.

"Cal Dean and the outfit from Petersen's were in town last week," she said. "They're sure looking for you—so they said. I heard that Cal made a speech in Ben Day's place and showed off the Krag bullet hole in his arm——"

"The army Krag makes a nice, neat hole," commented the doctor.

"How did the gentleman get a Krag bullet hole in his arm?" asked Betty, who had been listening with her chin in her hand.

The doctor laughed. "That's the point of the story, Miss Albright. If the authorities down at Cheyenne knew where Cal got his bullet hole he'd be in jail along with five of his friends; but he's too slippery."

"But you know?" she hinted.

"I suspect," said the doctor. "You see, Miss Albright, up here in Sweetwater there's the sheep side and the cattle side. The cattle-

men hate sheep like poison. If you've noticed a hill that sheep have grazed over you'll see that they have eaten everything clean to the roots. A goat could scarcely get a meal off the pasturage a flock of sheep leave behind. For that reason, and for others it's no use going into, the cattlemen hate to see sheep coming into the country. The day isn't so far behind us when cattlemen took the law into their own hands and made things too hot for any but the big breeders. But that state of things has been given its death blow, and I guess I can truthfully claim a little credit for giving the law a leg up in Sweetwater County."

"And is that why Cal Dean is looking for you?" persisted Betty.

The doctor interested her more than any of the Westerners she had met. He was lean and dark, with the deep black eyes of the man who would go to the stake for an idea. There had been a certain flash of grim humor in his face when Myrick advised him to stay east of the Divide that aroused her curiosity. "Is Cal Dean sheep or cattle?" she asked.

"He's just a cowpunch, and as ornery a specimen as any ranch in Sweetwater can boast. But he's got a kind of fiery eloquence that always gives him a following among the

riff-raff of the ranches. He hates me on account of a little help I gave Jim Morse last month. Jim Morse used to be a cattleman; but failed in cattle and went in for sheep. He turned four thousand of them onto his range one week, and every cattleman for 200 miles around was his enemy from that time on.

"One morning Jim woke up to find 800 of his sheep shot and a good-sized bunch at the bottom of a canyon with their necks broke. This happened twice. Of course, Jim wasn't sitting meekly at home all this time; but what could he do? He was practically single handed. The Mexican herders will run at sight of a cowpunch with a gun, and Jim's range was so big he couldn't be on all sides of it at once. Finally one day he came down to town. He dropped in at my place and I could see he was plumb discouraged."

"'Doc,' he says, 'I'll be down and out if I can't put a stop to this thing right away. Two hundred more gone last night!'

"Well, we put our heads together. We kept the wires hot up to 'Frisco all that day. The 22nd Cavalry had landed in town from the Philippines the day before and it gave us an idea. Two nights later Jim and I rode out over the range with a couple of wagons—cov-

ered supply wagons, like these, Miss Albright. We had calculated just right, for about midnight a bunch of cowboys—the scum of four ranches—rode over the Divide, drove off the Mexican herders and opened fire on the sheep."

"They began killing the sheep?" Betty gasped.

"Sure! right and left, waded in knee deep among the woolly things and shot them with both hands."

"But you stopped them!"

The doctor grinned. "Well, I should say so—with a half dozen army Krags. Say, I never saw a more successful surprise party. When our men stepped out of those sheep-wagons and began winging cowpunchers at a thousand yards, why it was like lightning out of a blue sky. As many of them as could got away, but five of them were landed in a Cheyenne jail, and there's more than one man in Sweetwater to-day with a Krag bullet wound that he's hiding or boasting about, like Cal Dean."

The doctor rose and stretched himself. "You mustn't think we're a lawless lot out here, Miss Albright," he added. "Wyoming is a Sunday school compared with what it used

to be; but in every community there's some such loud talker as Cal Dean, who just has to run amuck once in awhile. The best way is to walk the earth as if they weren't on it——"

"And keep your gun handy," interposed the sheepman, who had silently joined them. Betty felt there was something behind the look the two men exchanged, but the conversation turned to horses and she asked no more questions. She would have liked to ask Jacinta why the sheepman had warned the doctor not to cross the Divide, but Jacinta had taken a leaf from her own book. She held herself silently aloof, helping Mrs. Myrick and talking only to the doctor. As the drowsy heat of the day passed Betty wondered if she had not allowed herself to be prejudiced without cause. She was contemplating kinder advances toward the little Wyoming Carmen when a new actor made his entrance on the scene and she found a fresh barb of suspicion planted in her heart.

A little way above the sheep-wagons the trail appears around the corner of the hills and winds down a steep and precarious descent. Just at sunset she climbed this trail with Sid to a point where they could see the sheep grazing toward the west. On their

way back they were forced to press close to the rocky side of the trail to allow a horseman to pass them. He reined in his little piebald broncho as he saw them, and Betty guessed that he was a Mexican. His immense sombrero cast a shade over his dark face and from this shadow he looked down at them with small, brilliant black eyes. He was dressed in new clothes, of the sort Betty had never seen off the stage before. He swept off his new and elegant sombrero to her and showed his white teeth in a smile as he passed.

They followed him down the trail. Betty could see, as his horse swerved to one side, that there were only two people in sight as they approached the wagons; and they were Jacinta and Fleming. They sat on an overturned soap box laughing together over an ancient copy of "Puck." When the Mexican's glance lighted upon this peaceful scene, he pulled up his horse and sat for a moment, rigidly staring. Then with a muttered imprecation he rode toward them, flung himself dramatically from his horse and poured out a torrent of Spanish.

Betty saw Jacinta spring to her feet, her face white, but her eyes brilliant with anger.

"You—Miguel!" she cried, and her hand flew to a little revolver she wore at her belt. Fleming put a protecting hand on her arm. Betty could not hear what he said to her, but she saw Jacinta make an imperative gesture toward a distant rock which jutted out above the trail. She turned and walked toward it, and the Mexican followed. Their interview was short, and as they could all see, dramatically stormy. Finally the Mexican, with a sneering laugh, flung an arm in Fleming's direction and Betty saw Jacinta rise with her haughtiest air. She spoke rapidly for an instant and then she turned on her heel and left Miguel biting his nails.

A few minutes later the sheepman called them all to supper. Miguel, summoning an air of suave good-humor, joined them. He seemed determined to overlook whatever differences he and Jacinta might have had; and he was especially ingratiating in his manner to Fleming—an attention Fleming received with amused carelessness.

Betty watched Miguel ride off after the meal with a parting sweep of his sombrero, and then, regardless of Fleming's look of protest, she attached herself to Mrs. Myrick.

That night Fleming, baffled and disheartened, asked himself as he dropped to sleep, why a man might master the most intricate motor problem and invariably short-circuit when he tried to understand a girl!

CHAPTER XIV

AT the bend in the trail Sid stopped the car and they all turned back for a last look at the sheep-wagons, their canvas tops shining dazzling white in the afternoon sunlight. Mrs. Myrick waved her hand from the door of one, while leaning against the tongue of the other stood a solitary figure. It was Jacinta, erect and defiant, scorning to wipe away, as long as they were looking back, the hot tears that stood in her eyes.

Just before noon that morning, Miguel had ridden into camp on a fresh mount, his new clothes showing signs of hard riding, but his smile radiating friendliness on everyone around him. He had suggested their crossing the Divide through Red Rock Pass, at certain seasons of the year the bed of a raging torrent, but which was just then an easily traveled cut through the mountains. As he pointed out, this route would mean a winding climb of three hours, but would save them twenty miles in the end. Moreover, he offered to

guide them to the other end of the pass. Fleming, who had to consider not only his time but his gasolene, figured that the additional fuel used in hill climbing would be saved in the descent, and was quite willing to try Red Rock Pass. The doctor, who knew very little of that section, also agreed to the Mexican's proposal. It was only the sheepman who hinted that the plan might not be entirely desirable. He drew the doctor one side and suggested that he leave the motor party and keep to the eastern side of the Divide.

"Red Rock Pass," said the sheepman, "is a mighty good place for an ambush."

The doctor laughed. "What of it? Cal Dean and his outfit think I'm in Rock Springs."

"Mebbe; but how do you know where Miguel rode last night?"

The doctor stared. "Oh, come, Myrick," he said, "your imagination's working overtime. I never saw the greaser before—he's got nothing against me!"

"You never can tell anything about a greaser," replied Myrick darkly. "And this automobile outfit—what if there should be trouble, and they should get in the way?"

"They won't. They've got tourist fresh

branded on 'em, and not even Cal Dean is fool enough to go 'round shooting up tourists."

And the sheepman said no more. With Miguel as guide they had set out, and at four that afternoon they reached the highest point of the Divide. To Betty the climb had been a succession of startling sensations. For two hours they had wound around the base of sandstone cliffs, hugging the rock, with the mountain dropping away sheer below them to terrifying depths of twilit obscurity. She had clinched her hands and watched with a fascinated terror the nimble feet of Miguel's broncho as it picked its way ahead of them, with what appeared a perverse intention to get as near the edge as possible without disaster. Miguel himself seemed to regard the trail as a spacious boulevard. He sang a gay little song under his breath and occasionally flashed his white teeth in a smile at her apprehensive face. The doctor rode with the easy slouch of the man who spends his days in the saddle.

In the car there was little conversation, for the business of making the best of the narrow margin of daylight left them was sufficiently engrossing to absorb their thoughts. Occasionally in the windings of the trail they had a glimpse of the plain below through which the

tributaries of the Big Sandy made ribbons of faint green amidst the dun-colored landscape.

A half-hour later they plunged into the twilight of Red Rock Pass. On both sides of them the red sandstone bluffs towered until the sky above was a mere ribbon of blue. From the formation of the rocks it was plain that some mighty forgotten river had once forced its way through this lonely pass. Lizards as brilliant as jewels darted from their path; a kind of waiting and listening silence hung in the air.

Suddenly Miguel, who led the way, reined in his horse with an exclamation. Squarely across their path lay a huge boulder. There was barely room for a horse to squeeze around it, and the progress of the car was effectually blocked.

The doctor dismounted and scanned the boulder, whose path down the side of the canyon was plainly marked.

"Must have fallen very lately," he said, picking up a bit of fresh clay which still clung to the huge rock.

Miguel declared he was desolated. He himself had ridden that way but yesterday—and the trail was clear.

Fleming's face took on its look of dogged patience once more.

"We've got to get the car over," he said simply; and helped Betty to a seat on a convenient rock.

In the next hour and a half Betty witnessed a little exhibition of ingenuity, patience and hard work that opened her eyes to some of the practical difficulties Fleming and his car had already overcome.

The boulder was too large for the combined strength of the party to move, and as it was impossible to turn the car in that narrow gorge a runway had to be built up over the rock itself. Under Fleming's direction a mass of driftwood from the last spring freshet was piled up against the rock with such loose stones and earth as could be collected. After an hour's hard work it seemed as if the car might be run up and over the boulder. Sid took the wheel and, backing the car a few feet, took a flying start at the newly made road bed.

The next instant the unfortunate Nero was hanging, impaled, so to speak, on the big rock, stuck there on its own flywheel! Fleming saw at once what had happened. When the front wheels had topped the rock and began the descent the rear wheels were still ascending.

Their traction at once commenced to scatter the newly made road bed, and immediately the flywheel settled down on the boulder itself, stopping the motor instantaneously.

With dark forebodings of a broken crankshaft Sid tore up the flooring to take a look at his beloved engine. A careful investigation failed to reveal any serious damage done, and Fleming drew a long breath of relief. The rear wheels were carefully jacked up, rocks and driftwood were piled under the tires and at last after infinite difficulty the car was coaxed to make the descent without further trouble.

In spite of their utmost efforts to accomplish their task quickly, it was dusk when they resumed the journey. Once clear of the pass the trail descended, a clear run of two miles before it turned and disappeared behind a fold of the mountains. At the top Miguel left them. It was not necessary to guide them further, he declared: there was only one thing to remember—where the trail forked they must be sure to keep to the left.

Johnston lighted their big searchlight as Miguel rode back with a parting wave of his sombrero. Smoothly they skimmed down the mountain side; their searchlight picking out

the trail with its silvery brilliancy. Where the trail divided the wheel was swung over and the car, according to Miguel's directions, was headed up the left fork.

Half an hour later Fleming motioned to Sid to stop the car. The path had grown so rough that they were forced to run on low speed, and even then it was frequently necessary to halt and reconnoiter. The night had almost closed in upon them; the sky had deepened to a wonderful blue; the stars hung white above them.

"What do you think of this trail, Doctor?" Jerry called.

"I think," said the doctor, "that in a very short distance it's going to cease to be a trail. But I guess you'd better go on to the bend, then we'll be able to see where we're coming out."

Ten minutes later the question of where they were to come out was settled with disconcerting suddenness. The car had crawled cautiously around a spur in the mountain, its searchlight showing faint traces of an old rock-strewn trail which vanished completely beyond the radius of the searchlight's beams. Fleming was just about to call to the doctor to ride ahead and reconnoiter when suddenly

the car pitched forward on a steep down grade. A brake band had snapped and for one tense instant it looked as if the chain might follow suit.

There was a moment as it pitched downward when the car rocked perilously from side to side; then it staggered for a moment under the pressure of the low speed clutch. At the bottom of the trail a wall of rock seemed to rise out of the darkness; there came a crash, and the car stopped with a suddenness that pitched everyone headlong.

Fleming's first thought was for Betty. They had been obliged to put her in the tonneau amidst the baggage and supplies, and he found her in the bottom of the car trying to extricate herself from the débris of broken cracker boxes, cans of corned beef and tomatoes, while one of the extra tires strapped on in the rear had broken loose and was encircling her shoulders.

"Betty! Are you hurt?" he exclaimed.

"No; I only need digging out," she laughed.

Fleming hurried toward her with a light.

"Thank God," said Fleming, and "Lucky tire!" he added as he helped her out. The doctor came scrambling down the trail after the automobile with his case of instruments.

"I thought I would sure have some bones to set that time," he said as he reined in his panting steed and swung himself out of the saddle.

The light of the searchlight showed them that they had landed in a sort of rocky cul-de-sac. The car had been stopped by one side of this well-like ravine. It would have been damaged to a much greater extent if the sharp down grade of the old trail had not been interrupted by a stretch of level ground. As it was, the poor Mountaineer had shattered another mud-guard, and the water was leaking out of the radiator from a dozen wounds.

"And my solder's most gone," said Sid as he ruefully gazed at the dented and sadly torn piping.

Fleming and the doctor looked at each other. The latter's face was grimly set.

"It looks like a trap to me," he said; "can you back the car out of this hole?"

Fleming shook his head. He pointed out that only the windlass and cable could get them up that last steep pitch, and it was out of the question to try and use them in that dark pocket. There was but one thing to do; they would have to make themselves comfortable until the moon got high enough to light up

their ravine, then possibly they might be able to use the windlass.

The doctor uncinched his saddle girths and threw the bridle rein over his broncho's head, then, while Fleming and Sid unloaded provisions, he set out to do some exploring. Besides the old trail down which they had come there was another way out of this well of rock —but only a man on foot could make use of it. The doctor clambered up this natural footpath for perhaps twenty rods. It ascended the cliffs opposite to where they had come down and half way up it broadened out to form a ledge twelve feet deep. With the fragments of rock that had fallen there it made a natural breastwork, hung balcony-like against the nearly perpendicular wall of the ravine. The doctor gave a chuckle of keen satisfaction as he stepped upon this ledge. He could see the twinkle of Fleming's lantern far below him in the depths of the ravine, and outlined against the luminous night sky was the shoulder of the mountain with the old trail notched in its rocky side.

" A neat little strategic point," said the doctor, and scrambled back to his party.

Sid had already made a pot of his incomparable coffee over the faithful blow-torch, Betty

was setting forth on newspapers the tinned chicken, tinned beans, more or less broken-up crackers and condensed milk which was to form their meal. She had recovered from the shock of their sudden descent and was inclined to look upon the whole adventure joyfully as "experience." In the fitful light from lanterns and blow-torch she looked distractingly pretty, with one of Jerry's scarlet handkerchiefs knotted about her throat and a new light of excitement in her eyes. She smiled almost in the old way upon Fleming when he shyly touched her hand as they hunted in the tonneau for the cups and spoons. She declared that her heart failed her when she thought of her father worrying and raging in Rock Springs, but after this dutiful expression of concern she threw herself into the adventure with a full appreciation of the picturesque novelty of the situation.

Supper was eaten and Sid was at work on the car, when suddenly the doctor sprang to his feet. Far up on the mountain side there had rung out the faint click of horses' hoofs, steel shod, against stone. Lightning quick the doctor threw a blanket over the lantern. For a moment there was silence, and then the sound was repeated, louder this time.

"Someone's coming down the trail," said the doctor, "and by the sound he's just ridden around that last spur. Just keep your Winchester handy, will you," he added aside to Fleming.

In the darkness the four stood listening. The sound of ringing hoofs grew louder.

"He doesn't care how much noise he makes," commented the doctor, "and he's in a hurry. If he don't look out he'll toboggan down the rest of the way into this very pocket, just as we did."

In another moment the doctor's prophecy was fulfilled. For an instant they saw the horse and its rider outlined against the sky as they made the last turn in the trail, then there came the sound of a wild scrambling plunge down the mountain side. They had barely time to get themselves out of the way before the breakneck rider was in their midst. The doctor's hand had flown to his hip pocket, but he dropped it as he said:

"Hello, Jacinta!"

The rider slid from her horse, while the others gathered in astonishment around her. She was breathless and trembling so that she had to lean against her pony to steady herself.

"You've got to get out of here quick," she

panted. "Cal Dean and the outfit from Petersen's are on your trail. I suspected Miguel—I got it out of him when he came back to camp—and I lit out as soon as he'd gone again. They're after you, Doc, and Miguel's told them Mr. Fleming's an agent for Jim Morse. They're the worst lot from three ranches if Miguel's leading them!"

The doctor put a steady hand on the girl's shoulder. "Are you sure, Jacinta?" he asked. "How do you know Miguel wasn't trying to scare you?"

"Because I know Miguel—and I saw Cal Dean on the lower trail just at dusk. There were five others with him, and they were headed south."

"There's no serious danger in Cal Dean unless he's part drunk," said the doctor, reflectively.

Jacinta made an impatient gesture.

"Monday was pay day at Petersen's," she said, "and—listen——"

It was a long minute before the others heard what her keen ears had detected—the far-away sound of horses scrambling cautiously down a rocky trail. The doctor loosened his six-shooter.

"There's no use in the rest of you being

mixed up in this," he said; "I'll go up the trail and meet them."

"By Jove, you'll do nothing of the kind!" Fleming cried. "You came up into this country to accommodate me—it's a pity if I can't do as much for you. I only wish we could get out of this trap of a place——"

The doctor whistled thoughtfully. "We can," he said. "There's a Romeo and Juliet balcony up there that was just built for this kind of a party. Come on."

CHAPTER XV

"ISN'T all this rather—melodramatic, Doctor?" Fleming asked, laughingly, as he unloaded from the tonneau his pistols and Winchester. "Surely you can't mean that we're in for a real row, can you?"

The doctor smiled grimly. He had just driven his horse and Jacinta's deeper into the ravine, and he was now examining his own gun hurriedly.

"You don't undestand the sheep and cattle question out here, Fleming," he said. "In its way it's as bitter as the race question in the East. And in this case it's an excuse for Cal Dean to organize a shooting party. He hates me—and unfortunately he's got pay day on his side. Listen to that!"

As if to emphasize his point there came to their ears a faint snatch of ribald song, and then the nearer sound of a horse being urged recklessly over the old trail.

"Drunk enough to be gay with their guns," commented the doctor. "Bring what extra drinking water you've got and a blanket or

two, and follow me up the other side of the ravine there."

Into one-half of this dark cleft in the mountains a glorious moon was pouring its radiance. It illumined the little fortress nature had thrown out high upon the cliff side until its rocky walls were shimmering in a bath of quicksilver. It picked out every stunted tree and boulder on one side of the ravine, but left the other in a purple-black shadow. In this inky blackness the old trail descended, although there was a point—where the pathway turned the spur of the mountain—when a rider on the trail stood out for an instant clear against the night sky. Past this point Fleming and the doctor watched six men ride, to be swallowed up in the darkness of the descending trail.

"Cal Dean and five others," said the doctor. "And one of 'em Miguel. They've reckoned on our being down there at the bottom," he added; "and I guess they're some disappointed to find we've vamoosed. Nice, snug little shelf we've got up here, anyway——"

"But the car's down there!" observed Fleming. "I wish I could have got it under cover."

The doctor crouched, peering keenly be-

tween two convenient rocks. Suddenly his arm went up and the crack of a six-shooter rang out. There was the immediate sound of a retreat up the trail.

"I thought so," he said. "They were getting ready to play funny with the car. You'll have to keep your eyes on it, Fleming—or it will be us for town on foot, if they can get a match to it."

And then he added sharply, to Betty, who had half started to her feet when the shot rang out: "Don't stand up, any of you. They know where we are now, and this moonlight puts us right in the limelight. Just lie low and let them open the ball."

A silence, tense with expectation, fell over the canyon; then a voice seemed to leap out at them from the old trail:

"We don't see your cayuse, Doc Chanler, but we know you're there. We want a little conversation with you and it'll be better for all concerned if you jest step out an' give it to us. We'll wait five minutes, and if you don't climb down on the tick, we're goin' to shoot up this —— —— hole in the wall."

Dead silence for a moment. Then the doctor half arose, a troubled frown on his face.

"I don't like it on account of the women,"

he muttered to Fleming. "Mebbe I'd better go down and have it out with 'em——"

But before he could finish Betty put her hand on Fleming's arm.

"I'm not afraid, Jerry," she said steadily. "You won't let him go down there, will you?"

"Of course not," said Jerry cheerfully. "Consider yourself appointed captain of the beleaguered forces, Doctor! And go light if it comes to gun play," he added in an undertone, "for we've only got a few rounds to our names."

The doctor's reply was cut short by a voice from the dark announcing the end of the five minutes.

"I guess I won't come down, Cal," called the doctor in his calm drawl. "But I advise you to think twice before you get funny with your guns. The law don't like fellows that shoot up tourists any more than it does sheep killers."

A string of profanity followed this ultimatum. There was a short consultation on the other side of the ravine. Then suddenly the night became hideous with a wild yelling and shooting. Half a dozen bullets whistled over their heads.

"Sit still," commanded the doctor. "It's

a regular cowpunchers' bluff. Save your ammunition till they charge us."

"Till they charge us!" Betty heard the command and shivered with terror. She drew a little nearer to Jacinta, who sat stoically clasping her knees, only her black eyes showing her excitement. The two knelt behind a pile of broken rock which lay at the back of their natural fortress. High above them the cliff towered. By throwing back her head Betty could see the stars through a fringe of brush at the edge of the ravine. Everything was unreal—a dream from which she would presently awake with a start of fright. By rising on her knees she could see the car, its brasswork shining in the silvery moonlight at the bottom of the ravine. She wondered if any of them would ever ride in it again—and then, swiftly, several things happened at once. There was the noise of horses scrambling down the trail opposite; figures hurled themselves through the moonlight at the bottom of the ravine, and Jacinta sprang to her feet with a scream of warning.

For the little Spaniard, her quick ears catching the tiny sound of a pebble dislodged at her back, had turned and looked straight into the face of Cal Dean! He was about to draw

himself up from his last foothold, one of a series of ledges which the doctor had overlooked, and which gave to an active man an excellent opportunity to step into their stronghold by the back door. He thrust her aside and leveled his gun at the doctor, who had rushed toward them at Jacinta's first cry. Betty saw the doctor stoop and make a lightning rush at his assailant. For an instant she shut her eyes and then she heard Fleming call to Sid for help.

Up the steep path from the ravine below the remaining members of Cal Dean's party had made a quick rush. Sid, momentarily confused by the attack on both sides of them, hesitated, waving his revolver wildly; Fleming, in no condition to do battle, would alone have met the invasion from that quarter had not Jacinta sprung to his relief.

She was as quick and as fearless as some enraged wild thing; she emptied her Colt's automatic down the path in a way that effectively gave pause to the four who still remained there. One had already gained the level of their defenses, and had thrown himself upon Jerry. Betty saw them swaying dangerously near the edge of the cliff. Something primitive and fiercely unafraid awoke in her. She darted across the open space, stooping swiftly

once as she ran, and the next instant Jerry's man staggered back with a howl of pain—for Betty had hit him squarely between the shoulders with a most effective fragment of red sandstone. She heard Jerry cry:

"Go back, Betty—go back!" but she stooped for another rocky missile. Then just over her head there blazed out a deafening roar. She saw a man stagger backwards down the path; a second and a third shot followed and Jerry fell at her feet.

Of the moment that ensued Betty never could remember anything clearly except the pallor of Jerry's face as she bent over him. More shots whistled overhead; she heard the scrambling retreat of the besieging party down the cliff side and she saw Jacinta snatch up Fleming's revolver as it fell from his hand. The doctor came running, his smoking six-shooter in his hand, and Betty wondered vaguely why such a good-humored man should swear like a pirate. Then all sounds grew faint and far away, the night darkened, and Betty, having acquitted herself extremely well for two minutes, quietly fainted away.

A few minutes later she opened her eyes to Jerry's face, very near her own and haggard with anxiety.

"You—you're not *dead?*" she whispered.

Jerry laughed and pointed to the bandage about his head. "Only scratched my scalp," he assured her. "Would you have—have cared, Betty?"

In the darkness he was very close to her, his face wistfully white above her. Deep in her heart of hearts she knew she would have "cared"—immeasurably; but the time was not come when she could believe in him wholly. She freed herself from his supporting arm.

"Of course I should have cared, Jerry—terribly," she said with a laugh that shook a little in spite of herself. "What is going to happen to us next? Have we driven them away, do you think?"

Jerry did not answer for a moment. He folded a blanket to make her more comfortable, and he made light of their position; but he took pains that he and the doctor should be out of earshot when they talked over their next move. Cal Dean and at least one of his party were disabled—that much satisfaction remained to them from the encounter, but between Fleming, the doctor and Sid there remained only a half dozen rounds of ammunition.

"They may not charge us again," said the

doctor, "but I'm inclined to think they will. They're in an ugly temper, that's plain; and the little damage we've done them has only made them worse. I wish I had made a better job of Cal Dean," he added grimly. "I only had a chance to wing him. Well, we can wait —and that's all we can do."

An hour passed on leaden wings. The moonlight shifted till their stronghold was in darkness and the old trail opposite was illumined. The car was being slowly engulfed in the creeping shadows of the ravine. There was no sign of their assailants, but their horses still stood below the trail.

"They're going to wait till the moon goes down," said the doctor. And in the darkness Fleming instinctively put his hand over Betty's.

"Poor little girl," he whispered. "I'd give anything if you were out of this!"

Betty's hand responded faintly to his clasp. "You needn't worry about me, Jerry—or feel sorry for me. I'm learning some things," and she smiled at him with an expression her face had never worn for him before.

There remained only a broad bar of moonlight at the mouth of the ravine. In ten minutes darkness complete and enshrouding would

be upon them. Fleming had turned to speak to the doctor, when he heard an exclamation from Jacinta. The next instant below them a tiny spark of light flashed out near the dark bulk of the car; there was the crack of a pistol in Jacinta's hands; a shrill yell pierced the air, and then the whole ravine was alight from a slender column of flame that leaped upward at the side of the car.

With the doctor's warning in his ears Fleming plunged downwards toward the blaze. He was oblivious to everything except the fact that his car was in danger. He was seized with a mad frenzy that gave him for the moment a strength and coolness not his own. A shadowy figure rose in his path and went down before the savage blow he aimed at it. A second loomed in the darkness and he used one of the two cartridges he had left in his gun—without effect apparently, for the fellow blazed at him as he ran. Close behind him came Sid and the doctor. He heard the crack of their pistols twice before he reached the Mountaineer.

The right side of the car was not a foot from the leaping column of flame; Fleming saw at once that one of their gasolene cans from the running board on that side had been emptied on the ground and fired. If they saved the

car they must push it away from that growing flame; and they must risk being shot from ambush while they were doing it. But in that instant for Jerry Fleming there was no possible choice.

The car had got to be saved.

With a yell to Sid and the doctor he ran to the back of the car. One tremendous effort and the Mountaineer moved half its length. It was clear of the flame, and two feet more would have made it quite safe in that windless night, when a shot rang out from the farther end of the ravine and the doctor dropped to the ground.

"They've got me, boys," he gasped. "You make for cover. . . ."

"Not without you," said Fleming; and they hurriedly dragged him to shelter behind the car.

The Mountaineer stood with its length across the ravine. Thus it afforded protection of a sort, and gave them time to take breath. Under the doctor's direction they slit his coat sleeve and bound up the wound, which he called a mere furrow, to be regarded as a matter of course. Twice Fleming and Sid dashed out to throw sand upon a tongue of flame that crept toward the car, each time drawing down

upon themselves a scattering volley from the dark.

"The cowardly skunks!" groaned the doctor. "Save your one round, for they'll rush us, now, I guess."

He was right. At the end of a five-minute wait that seemed a nerve-racked hour, Cal Dean made his last onslaught. It was like him —a display of savage bravado. There were four of them, and they made their charge mounted, yelling and shooting as they rushed down the ravine. Fleming took cool aim over the tonneau seat. For Betty's sake he must make his last shot do its work. As the foremost rider came into the radius of light, Fleming fired. He saw the man sway in the saddle, and then high over the infernal din there came the crisp crack of Winchesters from the old trail.

The doctor pulled him down to the ground. "Listen!" he cried, and his voice was shrill in Fleming's ear. "That's a Winchester—look there—look up the trail! That's Myrick—Myrick and the boys, thank God!"

CHAPTER XVI

AT his hotel in Rock Springs Betty's father was eating a distracted breakfast. This was Friday morning. Since Tuesday afternoon, as he himself declared, he had lost in weight and grown ten years older. For the hotel employees life had also been difficult since Hiram D. Albright arrived. Betty's wire had caught him before he had left the train at Rock Springs and relieved his first agony of fear for her safety. Fortunately his uncertainty had been brief, for he had not awakened from his nap until the train was pulling into the town, and before he had fully realized that Betty was not on board they were pushing her telegram into his hands.

But the reaction from that one moment of fright was fraught with uncomfortable consequences for everyone around him. He pestered the hotel people with questions about the locality of Myrick's sheep camp until they fled when they saw him coming; on Wednesday, when Betty did not appear, they were obliged to wrest him away from a fixed determination to go forth and hunt for her. They explained

to him that the sheep camp was a long day's journey from Rock Springs, and that he did not seem exactly in training for a sixty-mile jaunt on horseback. He gave up his project for that day; but on Thursday uncertainty and anxiety had reduced him to a fearful state of temper. As his anxiety for Betty deepened his ire against the cause of it all increased. Poor Jerry had never before occupied so low a place in the estimate of the man he would fain have called father-in-law.

One reflection gave the old gentleman a gleam of satisfaction. His car and his man would win the race. Vannuccini should be, as nearly as Mr. Albright could figure it, three-quarters of the way across Idaho. His harassed countenance relaxed to a grim smile whenever this thought occurred to him. On this Friday morning at breakfast he found it necessary to stimulate his spirits at frequent intervals with the picture of Jerry's deserved defeat, for no word had come of Betty. Before he had finished the cheerless meal, he had finally made up his mind to send out an emissary to recover and fetch back his wayward daughter.

As he stepped outside the door of his hotel he heard the honk, honk, of a familiar horn.

He turned toward the sound with an incredulous start, and the next instant Betty was in his arms, hugging him wildly, overflowing with explanations, laughing, begging him not to scold her and making it temporarily impossible for him to utter a word.

"You dear old dad!" she cried, encircling his neck in a strangling embrace, "I know you've got a lot of horrid things bottled up to say to us, but don't do it! Just think how glad you are to see me again all safe and sound, and—and here's Jerry, dad; he's done the greatest stunts with his car—now, shake hands with Jerry, there's a dear!"

But the name and sight of Jerry liberated all his indignation. He sternly removed his daughter's arm from around his neck and bade them follow him inside.

It was a memorable half hour that ensued. Even the intrepid Betty was impressed by her father's wrath. She gave up trying to defend her own carelessness in getting left behind, and tried to make her father see that she had been moved by the highest humanitarian motives when she went to the succor of Jerry.

"Why, his shoulder was dislocated, father!" she protested. "And when I found out he was hurt up in that sheep camp——"

"What was he doing in a sheep camp forty miles or more off his route?" her father interrupted. "What were you doing, sir?" he barked at Jerry, his keen eyes under their shaggy brows beginning to gleam ominously. Jerry opened his lips to reply, but a sudden, desperate eloquence seemed to have seized Betty. Her face grew very rosy; she plucked her father insistently by the lapel of his coat.

"He was crossing the Divide," she rushed in. "And there was a Mexican by the name of Miguel who guided us wrong and we had a midnight fight with desperadoes and we killed Miguel——"

Her father threw up his hands. "You *killed* a Mexican by the name of——"

"Well, somebody did," Betty went on. "We think it was Jacinta's shot that finished him, but it doesn't matter who did it. It's done. He was a villain, and he betrayed us and tried to fire the car, and if Myrick and the other sheepmen hadn't come when they did maybe I wouldn't be here talking to you now. The doctor said——"

Her father sat down suddenly upon a convenient chair. "Betty," he said hoarsely, "will you begin at the beginning and let me have it slowly?"

It was exactly what Betty wanted. With all the dramatic power at her command she related the story of their night's adventure, from the time they had left the sheep camp to their rescue by Myrick and two other sheepmen. She told of their finding the unfortunate Miguel shot dead beside the car he had attempted to fire and of the escape of Cal Dean and his followers in the darkness. They had made a splendid sweep up the trail at the first shot and got away in the confusion.

"They were regular brigands, dad; but you couldn't help a sneaking admiration for the way they could ride. Why, I was so scared that I was almost dead, but when daylight came and I saw the trail they had ridden over, on the run, you know—I couldn't help being glad it wasn't one of them who was lying down there covered with a linen duster. Of course, it was awful to think we had caused the death of a man, but out here, someway, things look different. People fight if they have to, and when they get into the kind of a corner we were in last night——"

She stopped at the sight of her father's gray face from which he wiped the perspiration with a trembling hand. "You might have been killed!" he said hoarsely.

She was on her knees beside him in an instant, with a contrite arm around his shoulders. "I was in no danger," she assured him, "I was hiding behind a big rock most of the time with Jacinta."

"Jacinta—who's she?"

Betty colored. "She—she's the girl that Jerry—that——" she stopped for the simple reason that she did not know what to say next.

Betty's father looked keenly from one to the other. "Well, well?" he inquired sharply.

"Why," said Jerry, very simply, because unaware of complications, "she's the girl I met near Black Rock Butte, Monday afternoon. She was running away from this same Miguel —didn't want to marry him, you know—and she'd lost her horse. Of course I had to take her to Myricks."

Mr. Albright sniffed contemptuously. "You virtually threw up the race and went forty miles out of your way for a girl?"

Jerry colored, but he stood his ground. "It was the only thing I could do, sir. I wouldn't leave a dog in that burnt-up desert country. I had to take her to her friends."

"Couldn't have brought her on to the nearest town, I suppose?" Hiram D. Albright's tone was sarcastically polite.

"Not very well, sir." Jerry smiled as he remembered Jacinta's air of unshakable determination.

Betty's father misinterpreted the smile. His temper rose. "Well, you've lost your race, sir, and as far as I can see you've got a mighty poor excuse. Betty, you go to bed; you look petered out."

Betty was indeed pale with weariness; her pretty hair was disheveled, and there was an unbecoming smudge on her nose. But in Jerry's eyes she was perfect, for she turned to him with a radiant smile and said:

"You did perfectly right, Jerry, whether you've lost the race or not. Here's my hand and I wish you luck."

She was gone before, in his grateful astonishment, he could reply, and he did not linger in the grim presence of Betty's father. There was much work to be done on the car; Cal Dean's attack on them and the unfortunate end of Miguel had to be reported to the authorities, and he must locate by telegraph, if possible, the whereabouts of Vannuccini.

This last he found a fruitless task. Vannuccini had evidently disappeared somewhere beyond the borders of Idaho, possibly off the line of the telegraph, and an hour's search failed

to locate him. With a heavy heart Jerry went back to the hotel for a brief rest.

"I'm afraid the game's up," he said to Sid, "but we'll go on—it's the only thing we can do."

"Why, sure!" rejoined Sid, cheerfully. "Never say die!"

A bath and a sleep restored Fleming's spirits somewhat. He lingered outside the dining-room a while in the hope that Betty would appear and join him at dinner, but he was half way through that meal when she came in with her father, a new Betty, daintily rejuvenated by the magic of a fresh toilette. She led the way to the table where he sat, and his heart performed the feat of leaping upward when she took the chair next to his.

For a subtle change had come over Betty. She was not the Betty who had found him merely amusing, or the coldly disapproving Betty of the last few days. She looked at him a little shyly, but with a sweet friendliness that made him most foolishly happy. With a simple masculine faith he accepted her changed attitude unquestioningly; he did not know whether he was eating ambrosia or a very dubious entrée.

Betty seemed bent on making that meal a

pleasant one; she did not mention Vannuccini, and Fleming himself had almost forgotten the shadow of defeat when his ears caught a fragment of the conversation at the next table. Sid Johnston had come in some time before and taken a seat at a table just back of them. He had apparently made friends, after his usual custom, with his fellow diners, and was cheerfully extracting from them everything they knew or declared they knew about the roads in Sweetwater County. There was one loquacious individual out of whose mouth wisdom and knowledge had been rolling for some minutes when he uttered the sentence that arrested Jerry's attention.

"You want ter look out fer that old trail near Granger. If I've said it once I've said it a hundred times that somebody would take a header some day off that trail into the gravel pit. I says 'I told you so!' to the section boss th' other day when that big red automobile took a flyer into the pit, and I says to him that the railroad had ought to——"

He got no further, for Jerry and Sid demanded simultaneously to know what automobile and what pit he was talking about. He looked amazed at the interest he had aroused, and, flattered by the fact that the pretty girl

at the next table was also excitedly listening, he told in great detail a story that put new life into Jerry and Sid and sent the color to Betty's cheeks.

Divested of its ornamentation the tale was to the effect that an Italian in a big red touring car had attempted to make Granger late Monday night and in the dark had plunged forty feet into a gravel pit. The narrator drew with the point of his knife on the table-cloth a map of the two trails into Granger. One of them pursued a roundabout way into the town, and the other, long since abandoned, had at one time reached Granger by a short cut. The railroad, after the easy manner of the vicinity, had interrupted this old trail by digging a gravel pit across it; had run a siding to the spot and then had neglected to put up a single warning to the wayfarer. Vannuccini, evidently lured on by the lights of the town just ahead, and running at high speed, had plunged into this pit and landed beside a box car full of Japanese section hands.

It was not the miracle of the escape unhurt of the two men in the car that interested that loquacious individual so much as the effect of the accident upon the Japanese section hands. When the car came crashing down upon their

sleeping place they at first thought it was an earthquake, and Pete Rankin, the section boss, said he had never heard such an uproar of heathen tongues in his life. Then, when the Japs discovered the red car and its badly bruised occupants, they were near to mobbing the unfortunate Italian for what they considered a diabolical attempt on their lives.

"But the car—was it smashed up much?" interrupted Sid eagerly.

"Well, I ain't up on automobiles," admitted the narrator, "but I seen it when it was loaded on a car for Diamondville an' it looked to me like a pretty fair imitation of a wreck. They sent it to Diamondville because th's a big machine shop there," he added in answer to a question from Mr. Albright, who had joined the group.

Without ceremony Sid Johnston bolted for the door, the light of battle gleaming in his eyes; and with one look at Betty, Fleming followed.

Betty went slowly up to her room. She stood at the window a few minutes, her smooth brow wrinkled thoughtfully; then with a quite unreasonable blush she pinned on her hat and ran down to the street. As she left the hotel she glanced about guiltily for her father, but

he was still in the dining-room. She walked determinedly down the street until she came to the blacksmith shop, in front of which stood the Mountaineer. Sid Johnston was pumping up the rear tires and Jerry was testing a new set of dry cells with his ammeter.

He looked up surprised as she stopped beside him. "Would you like some more adventures, Betty?" he laughed.

"I want to ask you something, Jerry," she said. "Will you walk down the street a little way with me?"

When they had turned into a quiet little side street she said, unexpectedly: "Jerry, how did Mr. Vannuccini know about Jacinta?"

"He saw her first!" Jerry laughed ruefully. "Met her on the western edge of the Red Desert and left her for me to pick up. Pleasant, subtle beggar that Vannuccini."

"Too subtle!" said Betty scornfully.

Jerry laughed as if nothing could depress him now. "Never mind, Betty—didn't he run into a gravel pit? Sort of poetic justice, you know. I don't believe he's more than got away from Diamondville now; I'll beat him yet, you'll see, Betty."

Betty's eyes kindled. "You must beat him, Jerry. I shall feel—I can't tell you how I shall

feel if you don't. You've got to beat him now; it's the only way left us to convince father——"

She stopped in swift confusion; the "us" was too significant. There were two small boys eying them from a doorway; they stared solemnly round-eyed at the spectacle of a strange, pretty young lady hastily withdrawing her hand from the enthusiastic clasp of an athletic young man in a corduroy coat. The strange young lady was rosily remonstrating with the athletic young man for his indiscreet public demonstration. In order to distract attention from her own rosiness she was also talking very fast.

"Of course, you can see for yourself father is dreadfully prejudiced now. He's got to blame somebody for his two days' anxiety about me, and besides he declares you've 'whiffled' about in a most unnecessary manner and probably lost the race, and in short he can't see any good in you! There's no use arguing with dad—it only makes him stick to his opinion harder. The only way to convince him is to *show* him. I just wish he'd been with us yesterday. He would have realized that automobiling out here is no easy thing. I almost wish you could take dad right out into the canyons

and sage brush and mountain passes and things long enough to—to scare him! Oh, I know that sounds bad, but you know what I mean. Dad thinks it's just a matter of sticking to the wheel and whizzing right along. Well, don't you see, what he needs is to be put in your place for a few days. I'm afraid father," she added with an anxious wrinkle of her brows, "is rather spoilt—just telling people to do things and having them done without his knowing *how* they're done."

Jerry stopped to look under the broad brim of Betty's hat. "Shall I kidnap him, Betty? I could give your father a taste of the road that would open his eyes; if you'll help me I'll kidnap you both!"

Betty stopped short and clasped her hands excitedly. "Oh, Jerry, will you? It would be the very thing! I'd love to be kidnaped, and father—he wouldn't like it at all, but it would be good for him! Could you do it? Would we be *very* much in your way?"

Jerry's expression hinted that Betty could never be in the way. He declared they could make room in the tonneau by shipping part of their supplies ahead. "But there isn't a minute to be lost," he added with a glance at his watch. "I'll be at the hotel with the car in

twenty minutes. If you can persuade your father to get in for a short ride the trick is done. Once get him in the car and we can make it as long a ride as you say."

Betty laughed delightedly. "I'll do it—I think I can manage him. I'll hurry back to the hotel and pack our bags and in twenty minutes I'll produce the victim."

"'Once aboard the lugger and the girl is mine,'" Jerry quoted, and the street resounded with their laughter.

Sid Johnston did not altogether approve of this new handicap, but he had a secret sympathy with the conspirators which kept him from more than a perfunctory grumble. And to Jerry's real surprise Betty produced her father. He let it be known as he took his seat in the tonneau that as a concession to Betty he would lend his presence to the race as far as Granger. He looked grimly resistant, however, and indisposed to lend himself to the game in any way. He was also pessimistically certain the landlord would forget to send their luggage on to Granger that afternoon. Betty returned to make sure of their bags, and Jerry followed her inside.

"Betty," he said, "are you game?"

"Depends on what you mean, Jerry."

"Well, see here," he went on hurriedly. "Keep out a small bag for yourself, put in a few things, and send everything else on to—Pocatello!"

Betty gasped—"But that's in Idaho!"

"Well, I asked if you were game!" Jerry grinned joyfully. "I've put in an extra pair of army blankets," he added mysteriously.

A gleam came into Betty's eyes. "Don't stand there grinning," she said. "Help me to put new labels on these things. How do you spell Pocatello, anyway?"

CHAPTER XVII

THE forty-mile ride from Rock Springs to Granger proved disappointingly uneventful. Nothing happened that could show off an aspiring motorist's intrepidity or skill; the trail was fairly good except for the tough sage brush; there were no thrilling grades, no dangerous mountain passes, nothing as it should have been according to the rules of picturesque romance. It was very tame. Betty's father conveyed the impression, as the calm afternoon wore on, that the difficulties of the transcontinental run had in his opinion been highly overrated. He sniffed scornfully a great many times and then went uncomfortably to sleep.

Betty, who was sitting in front with Jerry, leaned toward him and whispered despairingly: "I think you might have *made* something happen, Jerry!"

"But I couldn't do anything that might put us back, Betty," he returned unhappily. "He'd see through any little parlor trick I might perform, anyway. I've got to overtake Vannuccini. I must make the best time I can."

"Yes, yes!" she agreed entirely. "But see, there are the lights of Granger. I don't believe I can ever persuade him to go on with the car to-morrow."

A grin and a look of inspiration began to overspread Jerry's face. The trail runs at some distance from the three saloons, hotel and water tank that make up Granger, and the traveler who would pay it a visit must branch off at a certain point, cross the railroad tracks and ford the river into town. When they reached this point Jerry increased his speed until they were leaving the few scattered lights of the place behind them at a reckless pace. Sid leaned forward from the tonneau and reminded Fleming that he was missing Granger.

"Keep it to yourself!" he was commanded, and Betty gasped.

"Aren't we going to stop?" she whispered.

"Not unless you say so," Fleming replied with a chuckle.

Betty did not say so. She looked around nervously at her father, but he was asleep, with his head bobbing dreadfully against the tonneau back.

"Poor father!" she breathed; but she did not command Fleming to take them back to a comfortable hotel. And in five minutes there

was no sign of Granger; behind them was nothing, and ahead of them through a velvety starlit darkness the trail led away, into the unknown. In the distance the mountains loomed; all around them fell the mysterious stillness of the plains.

Betty stretched out her arms with a long breath of delight.

"I never dreamed of stars like these!" she whispered. "If I've got any gypsy blood I think it is stirring now. Look, the earth has melted away, there's only that little patch of trail under our searchlight and we're flying through immeasurable space! I'd like to go on like this forever—my gracious! father's waking up!"

Father was indeed waking up. He demanded to know if they were ever going to get to Granger. His tone was undisguisedly cross, and as Jerry leaned over the steering wheel he heard Betty give a nervous little giggle.

"You break it to him, Betty," he begged.

"It's your party!" she returned.

"Should have made Granger before dark!" came from the tonneau behind them.

"How shall I begin?" whispered Jerry desperately.

"Tell him—oh, I don't know what!" the

other conspirator replied, as she choked back a second giggle. Jerry thought hard and rapidly for two minutes. Then he stopped the car and turned toward the voice that continued to come crossly out of the dark.

"We've gone past Granger, sir," he said.

It is more charitable to sketch with a sparing hand the manner in which Betty's father received this announcement. Futile rage is never dignified, and in this case the wrath of Hiram D. Albright was, probably for the first time in many prosperous years, as impotent as a damp sky-rocket. He could not get over or around the fact that his expressed wish had been disregarded, that he sat helplessly stranded in total darkness, on an unknown trail, miles from anywhere. He was very nearly incoherent with wrath, but they understood him to be demanding explanations of this incredible and astounding contempt of his plans.

"My schedule did not include a stop at Granger, Mr. Albright," said Jerry respectfully.

Mr. Albright gasped, and demanded forcibly to know what kind of idiotic foolishness this was. "You knew I wanted to stop at Granger—wasn't that enough?" he roared.

"I am racing, Mr. Albright. I'm sorry if

you are inconvenienced, but when you accepted a seat in my car you accepted racing conditions. It is absolutely necessary that I make the best time possible—will you excuse me if we go on? We're losing valuable time."

And he threw in the clutch without more ado. From sheer amazement Betty's father subsided. Several miles slipped by them. The country was becoming more mountainous; the hills began to loom out of the darkness; more and more frequently they were obliged to dodge the giant sage brush; the rough trail, merely two-wheel ruts under their searchlight, twisted up hill and down, like an ant ingeniously seeking the line of least resistance.

When they paused at last with their front wheels hanging carelessly over the bank of a small stream, Betty's father found his tongue.

"It's criminal recklessness!" he cried, "rushing through country like this after dark! I suppose we'll have to stop here for the rest of the night?"

"Oh, no," returned Jerry gaily, "not at all! we'll just ford this brook and go on."

Mr. Albright stood up and eyed the brook. To his imagination it seemed fearfully dark and swift. His heart quailed before its unknown depths.

"Betty," he commanded, "you get right out. I'm not going to have our lives risked by this foolhardy——"

"Now, father," Betty interrupted sternly, "you sit down. Jerry has been doing this kind of thing for three thousand miles. Why, this is *nothing* to what he has done. Jerry, don't mind us. Just go ahead as if we weren't here."

Jerry and Sid, who had been turning the searchlight on the stream, climbed back to their seats and a minute later they were plowing through the water. Compared to some of the fords they had encountered this was a small affair, but it had its due effect on the unaccustomed mind of Betty's father. As they descended deeper into the water he clutched the back of the next seat as if fully prepared to swim for life any moment, and when with a last swish they climbed the opposite bank he sank back limply.

"Do you know," he asked Sid, whom hitherto he had ignored, "how long he will keep this up?"

"Oh, we may run all night unless the trail gets too bad," Sid returned, easily. "We have frequently lost the trail on a night like this and wandered around till morning looking for it.

Of course, it's never a dead sure thing that we won't go over a precipice when we get into the mountains; but you have to take your risks, you know, in a contest of this kind. This is a cinch, just now, compared to what it may be later. Why, back in the eastern part of the State we crossed a thirty-foot-deep gulch on two railroad ties and the same night we came within six inches of taking a header into the Laramie River——"

"Young man, you talk too much!" the old gentleman interrupted him. He was silent for a few nervous minutes while Jerry guided the car around the shoulder of a barren, rocky hill toward which they had been climbing for the past fifteen minutes. On the narrow trail with the cliff towering above them on their right and the ominous empty blackness at their left they seemed to hang between earth and sky. As they dipped into the shadows of the descending trail Betty gave a cry of alarm and her father started nervously from his seat, for directly in their path loomed up a shadowy something which resembled an elephant in the exciting instant when they all wondered if the brakes would stop them before they ran into it.

When they found it to be a big boulder from the hill above they had to face the necessity of

clearing it from the path. Sid and Jerry had only three arms between them, the dislocated shoulder being still troublesome, and a hint was conveyed to Mr. Albright that his help would be appreciated. He responded readily enough and they fell to work. It seemed a simple business to roll the boulder down the hillside, but in reality it took an hour's hard work to pry the rock from its position and get it to a point where a united push would send it down the canyon below.

But in that strenuous hour Betty's father seemed to have worked off some of his bad temper. He rubbed his hands with satisfaction as he listened to the crashing descent of the boulder.

"There! That's a good job done," he remarked, and Betty called out tactfully:

"What would we have done without you, Dad?"

At eleven o'clock Jerry got out his map. They should have made one of the little section houses along the railroad by this time, but as yet not a twinkle of light from any habitation had been seen. An hour later Jerry's eyes made out the dark outline of a low building a little way off the trail.

"It's a ranch house," he whispered to Betty.

"Shall we stop? Have you had enough for to-night?"

Betty admitted she was sleepy and famished. But as they drew near to the dark and silent house the outlook was not hopeful. The house was set sociably in the midst of the barnyard; a pig looked out inquisitively from a rickety lean-to, and some hens roosted on the front window-sill.

"I don't believe we want to stay here," said Jerry, "but I'll just have a look in."

The look appeared to be enough. They heard him knock; then questions and apologies, and a moment later he reappeared, climbed to his seat and started the car. When the house had disappeared in the night, he leaned back and laughed.

"It was a bachelor's establishment," he explained, "and dirty!—there were two small pigs roaming about the parlor and a great pile of wool in one corner. I think we'll have another try at striking a section house."

For an hour they followed the trail. A great moon had risen to light their path, but beyond that fortune did not favor them. At midnight there was still no trace of a settlement or ranch house. Sid brought some food out of their larder and Betty suggested they roll up in

blankets and sleep on the ground. She declared she had always had a longing to sleep on the ground under the stars; but her father did not seem to share her enthusiasm. He foresaw rheumatism in every joint and his face grew more and more doleful when he observed the others getting out the blankets.

"No one ever has rheumatism out here," Sid assured him, "you'll sleep like a top and wake up five years younger."

Jerry admired his own foresight when Betty cried out enthusiastically over the beautiful, thick army blankets he brought out for her. Her father was equally well provided and was given besides, out of consideration for his elderly bones, the cushions and rubber coats. When he had finally wrapped himself up and laid down he was rather disappointed to find himself fairly comfortable.

"When I was a boy," he said, forgetting his disgruntled rôle in the memories roused by the open sky above him, "I used to camp out for weeks at a time. This kind of reminds me of it." And he was off on a tide of reminiscence, which gradually trickled down to a sleepy disconnectedness and ended in a gentle snore.

He wakened next morning to a rosy dawn and a delicious smell of coffee. With the night

his crossness had evaporated. Although he would not have admitted it, he *was* five years younger, as Sid had prophesied, in spite of a terrific stiffness in his bones. The irresistible spirit of the open was descending upon him. Before they had finished their breakfast of bacon (fried over a fire of dry sage brush) with crackers and coffee, he was beginning to believe there was nomadic blood in him, and Fleming and Betty smiled slyly at each other.

At eight o'clock they were running into Diamondville. This coal-mining settlement lies in a barren valley and to reach it they had coasted down a hill two miles long. Before half this distance had been covered their brake bands caught fire from friction and they made the rest of the descent trailing blue smoke behind them. Betty's father looked rather nervous, but it was noticeable that their early morning run through the mountain gorges where the purple gloom of night still lingered, their struggles with sage brush and greasewood and their final flight down the mountain trail had awakened in him some latent taste for adventure.

"If Vannuccini is still here," he said, as they ate a second breakfast at the hotel in Diamondville, "I'd just like to go on with him." But

they soon learned that Vannuccini had left the place late the afternoon before.

"Why shouldn't we go on with Jerry, anyway?" Betty boldly suggested. "You know, now that he has only one arm he can really use, you would be such a help to him."

This view of the situation saved his pride. He allowed there was something in that, though it was rather odd to be riding in the rival car. But anyway, he didn't mind lending his aid to the expedition as far as Montpelier, considering how in need of cool-headed advice they seemed to be.

For Betty's sake, Jerry swallowed this cheerfully. "I want to make Montpelier to-night," he said. "We'll have to be off in half an hour. I'm afraid it will be too much for you both, going on without any rest."

Betty stoutly declared she was ready for anything, and her father was inclined to be annoyed at the presumption that he was not up to the run. In consequence the forenoon was still young when the travel-stained Mountaineer started on its way again with four passengers.

Just at dark they ran into Montpelier, Idaho. In that day's work Jerry felt that he had accomplished something more than was implied

in the distance covered. Two-thirds of their way had been one continuous fight with sage brush, which preëmpts the trail and spreads its gigantic, stubborn growth over the land as far as the eye can see. It was often necessary to hew their way through, and the task fell upon Sid and Betty's father. Fleming, with his shoulder still in its bandages, was forced to look on, which he did at first with some uneasiness, at the spectacle of Hiram D. Albright with his coat off, swinging a vigorous ax.

"Don't apologize to him," Betty had whispered, "it's good for him. Don't you see he begins to think the expedition rests on his shoulders?"

And some feeling of this sort or perhaps the exercise in that air, which is like an elixir of youth, or the changing interests of the trail which runs through mountain gorges and open plain, had certainly vanquished his feeling of resentment toward Jerry, for the time at least. He was sitting amiably beside the latter, who was driving, when in a stretch of sand they picked up the unmistakable tire marks of the Superba. They had evidently been made some time before, but an overhanging ledge of rocks had kept them intact from the wind.

"He was certainly going some when he

made those marks," Sid observed. Jerry nodded a rueful assent.

Hiram bristled defiantly. "Well, I guess we can overtake him; I don't see any reason why we shouldn't if we don't dawdle around here——"

And the others laughed, for he had evidently forgotten he was riding in the rival car. But his exclamation showed how far his sympathies had been unconsciously enlisted.

Jerry's first move after he had left his passengers at the neat little hotel in Montpelier was to wire Pocatello and Arco for news of Vannuccini. He had not been seen in either place. Jerry was puzzled, for he felt certain his rival could not have got beyond Arco, and it seemed improbable that he had broken down somewhere east of there. But he had learned not to borrow trouble, and he ate as hearty a supper as if his mind was quite at rest.

In Montpelier that evening there was a "show" which seemed to be drawing half of the town's thousand inhabitants. From the door of the hotel Betty watched them pouring into the hall—men, women and babies. There was already a line of baby-carriages outside the hall, advertising the presence inside of more mothers. As the last straggling cow-

boy and miner disappeared and the sound of an aged piano being disrespectfully treated came out to them Betty became possessed of a desire to "just look inside and see what they're doing." Her father demurred that she ought to be resting, and Fleming felt a little uneasy about the nature of the entertainment—until Betty pointed out the perambulators. Then they gave in and both of them escorted her across to the hall.

Their entrance, or, rather, the entrance of Betty, made considerable stir among the serried rank of the back rows, but attention returned with a snap to the stage a second after —for the Soubrette had appeared. She was a matronly soubrette who looked as if she might be a good mother—or at a stretch a grandmother!—but as she lifted her skirts and executed a modest step or two, every man in the house arose and craned his neck with simple delight over the shoulder of the man ahead!

"Say, they'd kill themselves over a good show!" Sid chuckled. Betty declared it was pathetic. "Why, the poor things are starved!" she said.

"Sure," Sid agreed, "ain't they three thousand miles from Broadway?"

That was his point of view; but when they

left the hall the Montpelier public was uproariously happy and everybody was buying soap and medicine from the members of the company between the acts.

As Betty left the hall she was aware that her father, who followed them, had stopped, staring at someone in the crowd that stood for want of benches at the back of the auditorium.

"What does father see?" she asked of Jerry, and they both stepped again inside the door. They saw Betty's father shouldering his way through the crowd toward a man leaned against the wall, conspicuous in that cheering audience because of his listless and disgruntled air. Betty recognized him first.

"Why, it's Jarvis!" she cried.

Jerry whistled under his breath: "Then Vannuccini must be here too! It's no use waiting in this heat," he added; "let me take you over to the hotel, Betty."

When they were in the open air again Betty turned toward him eagerly. "What will you do now?" she asked.

"Get a good night's rest," he laughed.

She looked a little disappointed. "Oh! I thought perhaps you'd steal off, and get the advantage of the—the other car by miles before morning."

"I'd like to, Betty; but it doesn't pay to overdo the thing. Sid and I need sleep, and besides, they say the trail from here is mountainous. It's too risky at night. You look tired to death, Betty. Get a good night's rest, and if we're off before you wake in the morning——"

"Jerry Fleming!" she interrupted, "you're thinking of going on without me!"

Jerry looked uncomfortable. "Betty, you know I wouldn't willingly leave you behind——"

She turned away to mount the stairs and as she did so she shook a threatening finger at him.

"If you leave me behind, willingly or unwillingly, you'll be sorry!"

Fleming asked the clerk to send Johnston up as soon as he came back to the hotel, and then he sought his own room. In ten minutes someone knocked at his door. To his surprise Betty's father walked in. He wore the expression that his employees called the trouble-ahead-look.

"Suppose you saw Jarvis?" he began.

Jerry nodded. "If he was here when we came in I don't understand how we missed seeing his car."

"He got in after we did; the car is in the hotel barn."

"Where's Vannuccini, then?"

An ominous grimness came into the older man's face. "He's here in town; been here since noon. Jarvis says they broke a radius rod forty miles down the line. Vannuccini left Jarvis to make repairs and he came in by rail. When are you going to leave here?"

The thought flashed into Jerry's mind that there might be an ulterior motive behind the question, and his hesitation must have been apparent, for Mr. Albright spoke up testily:

"I want to know, because I'm going along with you!"

Jerry's astonishment showed in his face and Hiram D. seemed to feel around irritably for an explanation. As none came he decided on a measure of frankness. For certain reasons, he did not want Vannuccini to know he was in the West at all. He could depend on Jarvis, who was an old employee of his, to keep his mouth shut, so it was not likely Vannuccini would know he and Betty had left New York.

"Until I get ready for him to know," Betty's father added, with a grim smile. "Now if you'll take me along with you, what time shall we leave?"

Jerry restrained a desire to grin widely, and told him five in the morning.

"Hadn't you better make it four?" Hiram turned around at the door to ask. "Get a better start, you know," he added.

"The earlier the better," Jerry agreed, and was preparing for sleep, when Sid rushed in.

"I've seen Vannuccini!" he said. "I left the hall fifteen minutes after you did and the first people I put my eye on when I got into the street was Hiram D. and Jarvis. They were headed down the street and I piked after them. They had a look in at one of those gilded-front palaces and then they went on. I said to myself I might as well have a look, too. Around one table the fellows were four deep a-shooting craps, and I elbowed in far enough to see the center of attraction was Vannuccini, all right."

"Did he see you?"

"See me? He was blind to everything but the nifty little pile of blues he raked in regularly! Someone told me he'd been playing since one o'clock. I wonder what Hiram D. thinks of Monte now?"

"I think I know," Jerry laughed. "Dig out, now, and let me sleep. Four in the morning, sharp."

It was eight in the morning when Betty struggled awake with the consciousness that she was missing something. The premonition deepened to certainty when she knocked at her father's door and got no answer. She hurried down to the office and was handed a note by the clerk. It ran:

4 A. M.

Dear Betty:

Take eleven o'clock train for Pocatello. I have directed the clerk to wire the Davis House in Pocatello to have a porter meet you at the train, so you'll be all right. Wait for me at the hotel. Expect to get in there before dark. Am just off with Jerry.—Dad.

It was an indignant young woman who ate a solitary breakfast after reading this note; and the more she reflected the more indignant she became. To be sent on by rail like a piece of baggage! It was an affront!

"If I had enough money I'd go straight home and let them see how they would like it without me!" she said to herself, and in her abstraction she walked out of the dining-room and almost into the arms of Signor Vannuccini.

There is no word which adequately describes the expression on the Signor's mobile face when he recognized Betty. If he had not been so quick at assuming a look of rapture, one would have said he appeared for an instant taken aback. But he rallied finely. He declared his gratification was only equaled by his surprise at finding Miss Albright in this out-of-the-way spot. But while he talked he was plainly looking behind her for someone.

"My father and I are en route to Portland," she explained.

"Then I shall have the pleasure of seeing your father before I leave?"

"No, I think not," Betty laughed, "my father has deserted me in the most shameless fashion. He went on this morning in Jerry Fleming's car."

The Signor might well have said "The Devil!" aloud, for that is the way he looked. But he only remarked that was indeed an honor for Mr. Fleming, and what was Miss Albright going to do now?

"I suppose I shall tag along in a stuffy train," Betty sighed. And then, just as the playwright manages the entrance of the tempter at exactly the right moment, Vannuccini stepped aside and revealed his car at the door.

It was obviously pawing the earth preparatory to a glorious flight through the clear morning air; it was enticingly ready, as if he had rubbed a magic lamp and conjured it up; it was in Betty's eyes altogether irresistible!

"Would you like to overtake your father?" Vannuccini suggested cleverly.

Betty did not allow herself to reflect; if she had she would have been waiting an hour later for the eleven o'clock train, instead of gliding away from the last houses of Montpelier in a big red motor car with the trail to Pocatello stretching out before her, the mountains catching the sun, the whole morning world smiling before them, and in her heart a wonderful, scared delight at her own daring.

CHAPTER XVIII

WHILE Betty was eating her breakfast in the hotel at Montpelier Fleming was the unwilling participant in an adventure that came unpleasantly near to ending abruptly his earthly career. From Montpelier westward along the Bear River to Soda Springs the road twists amidst most impressive and beautiful mountain scenery. Often it winds a perilous way around the face of some projecting rock, or plunges unexpectedly to the shadows of a forbidding pass. Between are valleys, made fertile by irrigation, but presenting difficulties of their own, for each irrigation ditch is from six to ten feet wide and eighteen inches deep, and each has to be forded. This made their progress slow, and when they struck the steep grades between Soda Springs and McCammon the Nero, geared low as it was, could only take them on low speed.

Just west of Soda Springs is a steep rocky pass, with a perpendicular wall on the right and an unguarded drop of several hundred

feet on the left. To lighten the labor of the car as much as possible Mr. Albright and Sid walked up the pass. In places the trail resembled rough steps, with its out-cropping rocks, and up this difficult way the car was slowly climbing when, just as the rear wheels struck an unusually obtrusive rock, the engine, forced beyond its endurance, began to "die." Fleming threw out the clutch, and as the car stopped and then started to back, he pushed down hard on the foot brake. The brake linings, worn out and burned by continuous mountain work, refused to hold on the forty-per-cent. grade, and the car continued to back, gaining speed each instant. The sprags, which might have prevented the descent, had been uncoupled earlier in the day to pry a boulder from the trail, and Fleming could only curse his own carelessness in not replacing them. As a last resource he seized the lever and threw in the low speed clutch.

This was too much for the badly worn chain to stand, and it snapped.

Mr. Albright and Sid saw what had happened. With one impulse they turned and fled for their lives down the road. On that narrow trail, with a wall of rock on one hand and a precipice on the other, it was not wise to

stand still and watch the downward rush of a runaway motor car. Sid was ahead and his quick eye saw a ledge of rock standing a little way out from the wall to their left. He scrambled upon it and pulled Betty's father after him. They were barely in time, for the car, freed from all restraint, had doubled its speed, and Sid, his voice shrill with terror, called out to Fleming to jump.

But Fleming was coolly watching the road over his shoulder. Steering backward he was trying to keep the car on the trail till he reached the level. He was aware of the horrified faces of the two men on their shelf of safety, and in spite of his peril the amusing thought crossed his mind that Hiram D. was certainly getting "limbered up"! The next instant he had caught sight of a rock projecting perhaps a foot into the trail. His decision came immediately; he steered the car squarely into it with the right rear wheel.

The shock threw him backward almost into the tonneau, and when he recovered his balance he found himself gazing down on the stunted herbage at the bottom of a two-hundred-foot canyon. For the car, with one rear wheel jammed against the rock, had waltzed half around, and it now hung with its front wheels

over the cliff. Very gingerly, but not wasting any time over it, Jerry climbed out. Then he drew a long breath and called out to Hiram D., who was hurrying down the trail:

"See the advantage of an engine in the middle—front wheels over the cliff and a nice balance kept!"

It took them the rest of the morning to jack up the car and swing it back to the trail; the broken chain had also to be repaired. In the final journey up the pass Fleming drove the car and Sid ran behind with a huge stone to block the wheels the instant the engine began to falter. Mr. Albright trudged—very willingly. He could not be induced to ride until they had left the pass, in spite of the fact that the unusual exertion in that high altitude made him puff till he was purple in the face.

For the rest of the day they ran without special incident through some of the most beautiful mountain scenery in the world. Occasionally a snowy peak caught the sun; they made their way between massive lava formations, grotesquely shaped like goblin sentinels of the trail; on which scores of eagles perched, quite unafraid, as if they knew themselves protected by the law.

Houses were infrequent. They rode through

an apparently deserted country except for an occasional sheep outfit or emigrant's wagon. Prospectors have left their mark on the mountain sides—hastily dug holes, like the work of a rabbit or badger, while two or three deserted villages, their houses the homes of snakes and small animals, bear witness to the restless, consuming haste of the gold-seeker. Now and then, along the railroad, is a general store, including in its stock everything from a paper of pins to a coffin. The storekeeper himself is often hotel proprietor, chemist, and undertaker in one. Often to these industries he adds a saloon with a faro table and roulette wheel, and it was in a place of this kind that Fleming found gasolene a dollar a gallon and tomatoes ninety cents a can.

The last two miles of their run into Pocatello lay through the Bannock Indian reservation; and in the main street of that city Sid Johnston had his first sight of the Red Man in all his painted glory. It was barely an hour after their arrival that Fleming found him buying an Indian belt cunningly embroidered in the latest Bannock fashion. Sid would fain have conveyed the impression that it was a belt for masculine wear, but Fleming remarked that it was very small. Sid looked embarrassed—an

unusual act of grace!—and admitted that he was buying it to send to Jacinta.

"Kind of reminded me of her," he said, growing redder. Fleming restrained a whistle, but neither of them had time to say anything more on that subject, for down the street after them came Mr. Albright, breathless from hurrying and with a distracted look in his eyes.

"Betty isn't at the hotel!" he cried. "I wired Montpelier and they returned that she had left there at eight-thirty in a red automobile!"

Fleming's lips set themselves in a straight line. With Vannuccini! "He should have overtaken us, for we lost four hours getting the car back on the trail," he said.

"There's another road ten or fifteen miles south of the trail we took; he probably followed that one," said Sid.

Betty's father and Betty's suitor looked at each other with haggard brows; they had at last a mutual sympathy.

"If I ever get her back to New York," groaned her father, "she'll never get into an automobile again."

"I might take the car and go back and look for them," Jerry said. "But no—that's no use, for I don't know what route he's taken.

Hang it all! what right had he got to——" he stopped short, listening. There was the near-by, unmistakable hum of a motor car approaching. Even as they looked at each other Vannuccini's big red Superba passed them and drew up amidst the absorbed attention of every one in sight, at the door of the hotel near by.

Fleming and Mr. Albright hastened their footsteps and were thus just in time to greet Betty with countenances of entire disapproval. She saw them coming and she made an effort to forestall criticism by a light-hearted greeting. The usual knot of interested citizens was gathering and Fleming hastened to make a way for her through the crowd into the hotel. He could see that she was very pale and that she was not as gay as the tone of her greeting. He noticed also that when she left the car she ignored Vannuccini's hand; she had said "Good-by" when he said "Good-night."

"What in heaven's name possessed you to do such a thing, Betty?" her father began stormily, as he followed them into the hotel parlor.

Betty leaned wearily against the marble top table that adorned the center of the room.

"Please, Dad, don't scold me," she said with a quiver in her voice. "I'm so tired and—and upset. I know I shouldn't have done it, but

the car was there all ready, and I didn't like it the way you'd left me, and there was Jarvis, that I'd known all my life—and I thought it would be all right. Mr. Vannuccini said he'd overtake you before noon. I really thought he could—but he didn't."

"He should have overtaken us," said Jerry sternly, "for we lost four hours near Soda Springs."

"That's what I say!" Betty's father broke in. "What was he doing?"

"Did you say Soda Springs?" Betty exclaimed. "See here, did you back down a hill and nearly go over a cliff?"

"Yes! how did you know?"

"We stopped in Soda Springs for water and a young fellow on a white pony told us about your car running away down hill. He had seen the whole thing from the bottom of the pass. Do you remember passing him?"

Fleming said he remembered him, and Betty went on to tell how she had expected every mile to see the blue car ahead of them.

"I couldn't understand why we didn't catch up, for the boy said you were only four miles farther on and your car seemed to be stuck. Mr. Vannuccini asked the boy particularly about which trail to take——"

"And then he took the other one," Jerry finished dryly.

But Betty was not inclined to discuss the subject further. She seemed dispirited and tired. She told her father she was sorry he had been worried on her account, with such unusual meekness that the old gentleman was entirely disarmed and said he was afraid she was going to be ill. She reassured him on that point, but added, sadly:

"I don't think I care about automobiling, any more—not for a long time, anyway. I want something to eat and then I'm going to turn in."

Vannuccini did not appear in the dining-room, and they concluded he had gone to another hotel. Betty was very silent during the meal. Fleming himself had little to say. He had been more hurt than he cared to show by Betty's escapade and he felt that some slight sign of contrition on her part was his due, but none was forthcoming. She accepted without a demur her father's plan to take the train next day for Portland.

From Pocatello Fleming's route would leave the main branch of the Oregon Short Line and run across the lava desert to Hailey and on to Boise City. It was far from advisable that

Betty and her father should follow him into a district so far from the railroad; and for her part Betty seemed quite resigned to the tamer means of locomotion.

It was only when they were saying their good-nights and good-bys that she smiled at him with something of the kindness she had shown him the day they had carried her father through Granger. They were standing at the foot of the stairs and, as her father went off to inquire about trains, she turned to Jerry with her old frankness.

"The Superba can't climb hills like your car, Jerry," she said. "It's a wonder on good, level roads, but it's like moving a man-of-war to get it out of an irrigation ditch, and there's too much weight up in front to rush them the way you do!"

Jerry was silent. Betty looked up at him keenly.

"You don't like it—what I did to-day, do you, Jerry?"

He looked down at her very soberly. "No, I don't, Betty. I never like you to do what doesn't seem to—to suit your kind of a girl."

To his surprise she made a gesture toward an open door near them which led to a side verandah. "Why did my accepting Mr. Vannuc-

cini's invitation to ride with him seem unlike me?" she asked, as they walked to the other end of the deserted gallery.

"Well, in the first place you put yourself in the way to be misunderstood."

"But there was Jarvis!"

"Yes, I know; but you don't know Vannuccini very well; he is a foreigner, not used to our ways—he might misunderstand——"

She nodded. "He did misunderstand," she said, in a low voice.

Jerry uttered an exclamation of anger, but she held up her hand. "Oh, it is what I deserved! But I won't tell Dad; he's so quick-tempered. You see, I suspected Vannuccini took the wrong trail at Soda Springs, for Jarvis leaned over from the tonneau, as if to correct him, and he got such a glare for his pains that he kept still. It set me to thinking, then, and before noon I had made up my mind we were not going to overtake you. I expressed some surprise and Mr. Vannuccini hinted that he had not supposed I really wanted to catch up with you!—It—it was—well, horrid! Not so much anything he said, but I felt there was a difference in his attitude, someway. If it hadn't been for good old Jarvis, I should have been afraid, and that's the truth!"

She drew a long breath as if the confession had lightened her heart.

"Please don't say anything," she added as she caught a glimpse of Jerry's indignant face. "I want Dad to find out everything about our Italian friend for himself. I don't feel like discussing him with father, someway. I think I'm rather disillusioned, and—and it *hurts* to be disillusioned, you know."

"Yes, I know," he said gravely.

She glanced up at him quickly. "Are you disillusioned, with me, Jerry? I shouldn't blame you if you were, but I don't want you to be. To-day I've learned—" she paused and a flush passed over her face, as if the words were difficult—"I have learned to appreciate you. I might have lived all my life in the East and thought you a nice, amusing boy; but just these last few days have made me feel as if I want to apologize to you. There—" she finished with a little laugh—"There is my hand on the apology!"

He looked at her hand as it lay in his brown, hard palm; but only for an instant. It was such a sweet, frank little hand that it demanded something more than calm contemplation. He put his other hand over it.

"Betty, Betty!" he whispered, "you mustn't

apologize to me. Whatever you do is right—and I love you!"

But she drew back a little at that. "No, you must not say that. This morning, when I started out with Mr. Vannuccini, I knew he was capable of a mean act toward you, but I went just the same. He wired me a lie about you and Jacinta, and I believed it—I haven't been a good friend, Jerry, and I won't have you thinking I am anything but a self-willed, reckless——"

But she never finished that sentence, for something in her uplifted face gave him the courage he should have had before. He was no longer a boy to be abashed by her laughter; he was a man deeply in love, and he knew the moment had come when he must face the issue for the last time.

"Betty, look at me," he said as he caught her two hands between his own; "you are the one girl in the world, to me—the sweetest, the best. I love you, I don't need to tell you that, I don't care what lies may have been told about me if you don't believe them, dear. But I can't wait any longer. I must know one thing. Do you—care for me, like that, the least little bit?"

She did not answer at once, but there was

a little break in her voice as she said: "If you'll let my hands go—please; I can't think without my hands——"

And then as they fluttered out of his grasp he gained a despairing courage. He drew her toward him as he said:

"Betty, Betty, if you have to think about it you don't love me——"

He could not believe that she had not rebuffed him, that she did not slip away from him with her old laugh; but a sort of incredulous rapture swept him when she looked up at him with shining, wondering eyes.

"I do care—I love you, Jerry. You've won!" she whispered.

Inside the hotel Betty's father wandered around exasperatedly. He said to himself that Betty ought to be in bed; where she had gone to he couldn't make out. And Sid was looking for Fleming. He wanted to know at what hour they would start in the morning and, in the meantime, he was yawning cavern-like up and down the place. He and Betty's father were a regular chorus of disapproval; they looked everywhere, but they did not know about the little verandah. Which was just as

well, for there was an amazing number of last words to be said.

"You've just *got* to beat him, now, Jerry dear," Betty said for the fifth time.

"I know it. I'll be a pauper if I don't; have to begin all over again; don't know when we could get married in that case——"

"And Dad would be another lion in the way. If you lose this race though, he's had a fair sample of your difficulties now. But you won't lose, you *mustn't!* I must give you something for good luck. Here—the very thing! my scarab."

They discovered that the green scarab would not go over the second joint of his little finger, so it was carefully anchored to his watch chain. This took time, and then there was the matter of telegrams to be arranged. Fleming promised to wire her from Boise, Burns and Prineville to the Hotel Portland. There was some unavoidable lingering over these details, and when they finally sauntered inside with a finely casual air, they were met by Hiram D. Albright and Sid in a state which Betty described as "foaming over."

But nothing mattered to Fleming. He watched Betty as she ran up the stairs and

then turned to call back "Good luck!" and he felt certain no better luck could befall him. But all the same he was going to make the great effort of his life in the next few days. He threw back his shoulders and said:

"Four o'clock in the morning, Sid—or suppose we make it three?"

CHAPTER XIX

AS Fleming drove silently out of Pocatello, he acknowledged that the black hour before the dawn is not the most inspiring time to begin the day's work. But he had spent an hour before he went to bed poring over his map and he determined, if possible, to make Cottonwood ranch that night. The ranch, famous over half the State for its hospitality, lay a hundred miles from Blackfoot, straight across the desert. In order to gain its shelter before night, he must leave Blackfoot, twenty-five miles to the north of Pocatello, by eight.

But the best-laid route of the motorist is apt to gang agley. It was entirely the fault of a stretch of sand and an Indian cowpuncher, who could make himself plain only in choice Bannock talk. The sand they encountered soon after daylight, beyond Ross Forks. It proved no obstacle whatever, when they had attacked it with their sand-tires; but, somewhere in the middle of it, Fleming lost the trail and wandered off on a deceptive side-issue of the main road, which lured him on and

then left him abruptly, without a landmark to hint his position.

For an hour they circled hungrily (having banked on breakfast in Blackfoot) among a maze of hills, big and little, and, just as it occurred to them that their predicament was really serious, they sighted a sheep outfit, hailed it, and learned that, if they wanted to reach Blackfoot, they must cut across country twenty miles to the northeast. This sounded simple, but, in reality, proved to be like driving through a gigantic maze. They had to wind their way among innumerable hills, until they lost all sense of direction, and finally were forced to fall back on the compass.

At noon they hailed with joy a tiny settlement. They descended upon it and found it was a Mormon village called Moreland. The first woman they met on the one street of the little town was simply attired in a blouse and a pair of blue jean overalls. She stared at their car with the frank curiosity everyone else was showing; but exhibited no inclination to scamper behind anything. Evidently she had forgotten the blue jean part of her attire. Presently another woman similarly dressed appeared in a near-by doorway, and then two

girls, arm in arm, came down the street. They were also in overalls, and Sid could contain his curiosity no longer. He hailed the next man they met and was informed that Moreland is a beet sugar town and all the women work in the beet fields. For convenience sake the overall had been adopted as the correct thing in working dress.

They were invited to dinner by a patriarch with a numerous family. It was an austere and unsympathetic meal, preceded by an endless prayer and unenlivened by such unnecessary concessions to the flesh as coffee or an afternoon pipe. They were told that Blackfoot lay to the east some twenty miles. In their wanderings they had circled around the Indian town and there was plainly nothing to be gained in going back to it. With gallons of gasolene and their replenished water tanks, why not strike across the desert to Cottonwood ranch? It lay seventy miles west, a tiny oasis in the Great Snake River desert. Almost to a certainty they knew Vannuccini had by this time left Pocatello. Until he ran into the lava district he would find the roads, with their rocky foundations, exactly of the sort on which his car, as Betty had said, was "wonderful." Obviously then it was no time

to be prudent. At one o'clock they left their Mormon friends behind and had launched themselves on the plains.

Out of Moreland they ran for half an hour through what is known as the "Rabbit Country." Rabbits fled in front of them and scurried away to the right and to the left of them. The face of the country was flecked with bits of rabbit fur from the last rabbit drive, and every farmer they met had his grievous story to tell of the pest, which has become as one of the plagues of Egypt in that section of Idaho. Then even the rabbit is left behind and the desert begins.

From Lost River on the north, to the Great Snake on the south, stretches this waste of lava. For a hundred miles there is only one water hole. Wild cattle and wild horses sweep over this great plain. Scorpions dart in and out under the lava rocks and the familiar rattlesnake gives way to the "side-winder" variety. In the mountains, which stretch away to the north and west like a shadowy wall, are silvertip bear and mountain horses.

Thirty-five miles west of Moreland they sighted the two buttes, Big Butte and Middle Butte, between which is the ranch of "Big Jim" Murray, famous as an Indian fighter

and scout for a long line of fighting generals, from Custer to Miles. From the top of Big Butte he has piped a mountain spring five miles to his ranch, and this precious fluid he dispenses to the followers of the trail at twenty-five cents a pail. The Murrays, thirty-five miles from the nearest neighbor, received Fleming and Sid with the most genuine hospitality; they were ready to give away even water with a lavish hand. But Fleming looked at his tanks and decided he had enough to carry them across to Cottonwood. He did not care to add a pound to the weight he already carried; but, later in the day, he was to realize what it means to run out of water in that arid region.

For, just before sunset, twenty miles beyond Jim Murray's ranch and half way to Cottonwood, they picked up the trail from Arco, and, in the lava dust of this trail, were the tire tracks of the Superba. For a moment Fleming felt stunned with the surprise of this discovery. He had been so absolutely confident Vannuccini was behind them that he could not believe in the evidence before him until they rounded a crater-like formation and caught the flash of the sun on the Italian's car, not more than a mile and a half ahead.

Sid, who maintained a disconsolate silence from the moment they ran across the Superba's tire marks, suddenly leaned over the dash and pointed out a line of moisture already drying in the heat of the sun.

"By George! his radiator's leaking," he exclaimed, "and leaking bad, too."

The occupants of the red car had evidently discovered their mishap, for they had stopped and, as Jerry overtook them, Jarvis, the mechanic, was examining his radiator with an anxious face. A third man had dismounted from the car. He was a native, by the dry and burnt look of his skin and the comfortable hang of his six-shooter. Sid made a guess that Vannuccini, who had evidently followed the Arco trail, had picked up a guide at Blackfoot.

"They're going to ask us for water," Sid predicted, and he was right. As they ranged alongside the partially disabled car, Vannuccini saluted affably.

"We're very fortunate to be overtaken, for you see"—with a comprehensive gesture —"our predicament. Can you let us have some water? I think a gallon would take us to—what is the name of the place?—yes, Muldoon."

In the half minute Vannuccini was speaking, an extraordinary number of thoughts crowded through Fleming's mind. Beyond his greeting the night before in Pocatello, he had not exchanged a word with his rival since they parted outside of Medicine Bow. Vannuccini's voice brought back, like a flash, that moment and the Italian's "Permit me," as he took the road ahead of the car that had rescued him. On the top of this memory crowded Betty's experience of yesterday.

"How far is it to Muldoon?" he asked.

The Westerner squinted at the trail. "It's a right smart walk and a short ride. 'Bout twelve miles, I make it."

Fleming looked at Vannuccini. "I've got just about enough water to get to Muldoon—and none to give away, I'm afraid."

It was on his tongue to suggest an expedient; but human nature was too strong for him. He threw in the clutch and glided away without another look at Vannuccini's astonished and angry face. Half a mile further on he stopped.

"No use," he said. "I can't do such a dog mean trick as that! Sid, look in the tonneau and bring out that yellow bag near my suit case. Yes, I know it's bran. No, I'm not go-

ing to offer it to them to eat. Jump in and don't waste time staring at me like a moon-struck idiot."

Back to the stranded car they went. Jarvis was preparing to go to work at the radiator with the soldering irons.

"Here," Fleming called curtly; "try this in your radiator."

Vannuccini took the bag as if he suspected a practical joke, and Jarvis said, "Bran! what do you do with it?" in a puzzled tone.

"What water you've got in your radiator is hot, isn't it? Well, pour in a handful of that bran and I think you will find it will help you out," Fleming explained.

Jarvis followed instructions. Almost immediately the bran began to drip through the crevices in a half-cooked state; in three minutes it had caked and was choking up the leaks in a surprisingly effective manner.

Fleming did not wait for comments. He turned the car and took up the trail at a lively pace.

"That's a nifty little trick," Sid remarked. "It beats soldering. Why, you've saved them two hours, the shape their radiator was in. Do you think that bran will hold?"

"I've heard that it will; but I don't know

from experience. Kind of hope that it won't; now that my conscience is satisfied."

And Fleming laughed with a gleam of excitement in his eyes. "Did you notice how his car was traveling, Sid? It's just as I said—too heavy, and the balance is wrong. They tell me the sand is eighteen inches deep part of the way through Oregon. Now, if you and I don't get ourselves lost again, my boy, we're going to show that red wagon our heels the rest of the way."

Sid said "Sure" cheerfully. But he looked at the trail, winding everlastingly among what appeared to be the craters of extinct volcanoes. It was such a thread-like clue, through such a forbidding and baffling waste, that any prediction seemed presumptuous. If they lost that slender guide, they might wander for days without finding it again. The very thought made him thirsty. He wiped the thick gray dust from his face and eyes and, as he did so, a turn in the trail brought them within sight of Muldoon—all there was of it—a house or two, set down amidst lava hills and general loneliness.

There is a mail in Muldoon and a post-mistress, who receives and distributes it once in ten days, and she told Fleming that Cotton-

wood lay about eight miles west, "Straight west and good trail."

He refilled his water tanks and took up the trail once more. Darkness had settled around them—darkness through which hills were looming—when the trail led them into a little valley. Here, with the mountains circling them on three sides are the half dozen log buildings that make up Cottonwood ranch. It is a tiny oasis, protected from the desert by the hills, unsurveyed and untaxed, made fertile by irrigation and rich in several minerals. With the unusual sound of Fleming's car, the Drake family came to the door. Like the majority of Westerners, they had the fine art of simple hospitality. Mrs. Drake spread for them a supper which was as a banquet to their thirst and hunger, and the men of the family offered them a bear hunt if they would stop a couple of days.

But Fleming had cast himself for the rôle of the indefatigable youth whose motto was "Excelsior!" He begrudged the necessary hours of sleep; he would like to have gone on all night. Before daylight next morning he had routed out Sid, and they oiled up and filled their tanks and were on the road by sunrise.

Two hours later they were creating a sensation in Hailey as they drove up to the Ferris House for breakfast. Two horses, with their big fifty-pound cowboy saddles, hitched in front of a restaurant and dance hall, executed a jig of terror and then disappeared into the landscape, and everyone who was stirring in Hailey ran to doors and windows. But this was a mild disturbance compared to the effect the car produced on a drove of sheep beyond Hailey. They were rounded up in a cup-like valley, four thousand of them, circling about slowly in a blinding cloud of dust. As the car approached them, a surge of terror struck the entire woolly mass up the valley and, as Fleming looked back, the drovers were galloping wildly to keep the band from stampeding to the hills.

Between Hailey and Boise the sand and cinders through which they had traveled the day before gave way to a hilly trail with long stretches of sage brush and lava rocks. Sometimes for miles they followed it over solid lava beds, as smooth as an asphalt pavement, but with frequent fissures in the rocky surface that made high speed dangerous.

Before sundown they had made the ninety miles to Boise. It was in fact the best day

they had made for a long time, in spite of battery troubles which only Fleming's resource prevented from causing a serious predicament.

They were running along at a good speed, just after their dinner at Canyon Creek, when they noticed that the engine was losing power. Sid got out and tested the batteries carefully. Then he took off his cap and scratched his head despondently.

"The best I can make my ammeter read is four," he said; "and it's fifteen miles before we can get a new set of dry cells. It looks to me as if we were up against it hard."

Fleming looked at the batteries thoughtfully. "I think I know a trick that will bring us into Boise, even if this set of cells stops making a spark," he said.

They had not made two miles farther when his ingenuity was put to the test; for the engine, after numerous missings, suddenly struck work, and, before Fleming could throw out the clutch, the car stopped dead. Fleming directed Sid to take the cells out of the battery box. Then, with a quarter-inch drill, he made a hole in the top of each cell and poured into this hole about two tablespoonsful of water.

Sid sniffed incredulously; but a test showed that, with this homœopathic treatment, the

worn-out cells had returned to life. The dial of the ammeter showed eleven amperes. Sid returned the batteries and connected them, and a half turn of the starting crank set the engine to running as merrily as ever.

Fleming drew a long breath of relief. "I didn't know whether that stunt would work," he remarked; "but I'm mighty glad it did. That's about as close to being stranded as I ever want to come in this dried-up corner of the world."

In Boise they reveled in the luxury of bath and supper at the best hotel they had met with since leaving Chicago. Fleming felt that nothing could add to the general rightness of things, when he found he could telephone directly to Betty's hotel in Portland. It was impossible to keep an exultant note out of his voice as he told her they were three-quarters across Idaho, in fighting trim, and a lap or two ahead of the Italian car.

"We ought to make Ontario, Oregon, tomorrow night," he said; "then in about five days to Wapinitia and then Mount Hood. If I do it I'll be the first to cross the Cascades in a motor car——"

"Unless the Signor crosses ahead of you!" Betty interrupted.

"Well, I don't think he will. His car isn't built for wading swamps and climbing rocks —as I've said before. But we'll see. What's that? Oh, yes, I'll take care of myself. It's awfully good to hear your voice, Betty."

And the conversation at this point left motor cars and became too personal to be listened to honorably.

The next morning Sid and Fleming were up before daylight and at work on the car. The pistons were taken out and examined; the badly worn rear tires were changed for a pair with new Bailey-treads; a set of new dry cells was installed, and, to get the maximum of power for the mountains before them, Spitfire plugs were substituted for their badly corroded old ones. For the next 350 miles they would have to depend on their own resources. Boise was their last town of any size until they reached Portland. They could count on no convenient garage for repairs. Even blacksmiths' shops are few and far between in Oregon, and they must carry with them every part of the car that might need replacement on the long journey across the State. When they left Boise, in the middle of the forenoon, escorted by Jim Taylor, the garage owner, in his little old-fashioned Franklin, the Mountaineer was

like a veteran ready for a week of forced marches.

That day they found a bridge down over the Little Boise River, and were obliged to cross it in extremely precarious fashion on two punts lashed together and poled by Mexican herders. A second ferry across the Snake River landed them on the Oregon shore after a sixty-mile drive through choking alkali dust, relieved only by patches of barren prairie and sage.

The next day they left the railroad behind them. They would not see it again for 350 miles. In two days' hard traveling they reached Prineville, a prosperous little town, very nearly the geographical center of the great State. For 200 miles around Prineville every necessity of life not manufactured or grown in the vicinity is brought in by "freighters." On the trail from Ontario to Burns Fleming's car frequently passed these twenty-horse outfits, driven with a single line, plodding west through a cloud of dust, carrying to the interior anything from a paper of pins to a piano. They found that any part of the trail traveled by these freighters presented few difficulties to their car; but, for a hundred miles between Burns and Prineville, there is

practically no freighting, and Fleming ran into sand oftentimes half way up to the hubs. They reached Prineville at midnight, after having literally fought their way for sixteen hours through irrigation ditches, rocks and sand.

In the little hotel at Prineville, Fleming and Sid were told they could never get the car over the Cascades, even if they succeeded in climbing the Muleton range. It was a rare thing for even an emigrant wagon to cross Mount Hood, the usual route being to the Dalles and then down the Columbia by steamboat to Portland. Fleming admitted that it might seem absurd for a car with an eight-inch clearance to attempt what was difficult for wagons; but he meant, nevertheless, to have a try at the Barlow Pass. It was impossible for him to find out how far behind him his rival was and, with this uncertainty as to Vannuccini's progress, he felt impelled to press on with the least possible loss of time.

For the last 200 miles they had noticed a change in the weather. The early mornings and nights were beginning to be very cold. A ranchman at whose place they had dinner, after leaving Prineville, told them the sheepmen were coming down from the hills and

there was every sign of an early snowstorm. He shook his head at the mention of Barlow Pass.

"You'll never make it with that there outfit," he said, "unless it c'n climb trees. And you'll find it'll be standing on its hind legs most of the time when you get into the Warm Spring Hills."

Fleming was inclined to laugh at this gloomy prophecy; but, late that afternoon, he admitted there was something in the ranchman's remark about the Warm Spring Hills. The country had been growing more and more mountainous from the time they first sighted the snowy peaks of the Three Sisters, an hour after leaving Prineville. At three in the afternoon the trail had become a succession of sharp up-grades and sudden descents. At four they found themselves at the bottom of a mountain to which Sid respectfully took off his hat.

"You're the prize winner," he said. "Do you think for a moment this car will take that grade?" he asked Fleming.

"Maybe not," laughed Fleming; "but it's going to make a bluff at it before it gives up."

A quarter of the way up the gradometer

registered a twenty-two per cent. grade; half way up it had climbed to forty and the engine was slowly but surely giving up the struggle. It seemed inevitable that they would slip back down the mountain. As the car stopped Fleming speeded up the engine; then, as he threw in his clutch and the Nero jumped forward a few paces, Sid ran after it with a stone to keep it from the backward rush. They had made two-thirds of the distance in this fashion when one of the brake bands snapped. Only the sprags on the rear axles prevented the car from backing down the trail and being dashed to splinters on the rocks below. The grade steepened and further progress was plainly impossible. With the sprags holding the Mountaineer in place, Fleming and Sid attached their cable to an enormous flat rock at the side of the trail and, thus ballasted and dragging the rock, they backed the car down the hill they had just climbed so laboriously.

Once safely on the level again, they cast themselves down exhausted, and for the moment at the end of their resources. A tumultuous little stream ran at the foot of the mountain. The bed of this stream was evidently the only alternative route. Night was coming on and not even Fleming cared to drive the

car, possibly for miles, up the bed of an unknown stream in the semi-darkness. He resumed the steering wheel and turned back. In half an hour they had sighted a small ranch, whose owner, a gaunt, sullen-eyed Indian, allowed them—for a dollar—to sleep on the hay in his barn, a privilege they shared that night with a skunk—a peaceably inclined little animal who did not make his presence known until he walked out of the hay next morning.

That forenoon they drove the car a mile up the bed of the stream, until they were able to strike the trail beyond the mountain where they had met their defeat the afternoon before. At one o'clock they boiled their coffee at a point in the trail from which they could see a wonderful panorama of hills and mountain peaks. They had reached the highest point of the Muleton Mountains; all about them, like the waves of a great sea, were the hills of this range, and, ninety miles to the northwest, the white cap of Mount Hood rose with a miraculous effect of light above the drifting clouds. Even the city-bound soul of Sid Johnston was impressed by the beauty of the moment, and Fleming, as he looked across at the snowy peaks of the Cascades, felt a strong

exhilaration rising in him. He knew that between those gleaming peaks he was to face the crucial moment of the long, hard road he had traveled. The test of his courage and the test of his faith in himself lay there, in that last gaunt barrier.

Three hours later they ran into Wapinitia with their brake bands smoking from continuous coasting down mile after mile of mountain trails. There are three saloons, a boarding-house, and two frame dwellings in Wapinitia, and the first person they met in this outpost of civilization was Hiram D. Albright.

He stood in front of the boarding-house, and his face, as he greeted them, wore the sheepish smile of the boy who has run away to pay a visit and is rather dubious about his welcome.

"Came in by stage," he explained. "Betty wanted I should come—she got to worrying. People in the hotel at Portland told her no automobile could get thrugh the Barlow Pass on account of the big storm a few days ago. I thought I'd just hang around for Vannuccini and maybe I'd go through with him. Might just as well go back to the railroad in the stage," he added with an attempt at perfect indifference.

Sid and Fleming looked at each other apprehensively. It was perfectly plain to them that Betty's father had got bitten by the motor microbe, and it was equally plain that it made little difference to him which car he rode in. He had heard the call of the road and had found it irresistible.

"But how do you know Vannuccini is taking this route?" Fleming hinted. "He may be going over Santiam Pass and, in that case, he would only follow our trail as far as Prineville, and then he'd branch off to the South."

Hiram D. was not bothered by this possibility. "Oh, well," he said easily; "if he doesn't turn up by to-morrow morning, I'll just go along with you. I can't waste any more time fooling around here anyway."

And Fleming said nothing. It had occurred to him that possibly it might do Betty's father good to face some real difficulties; it would be the best chance in the world to prove to him that the Mountaineer could do what had been claimed for it. The idea had evidently occurred to Hiram and stirred the spirit of opposition in his mind, for he said, with a hint of defiance:

"They tell me an emigrant wagon came over the pass the other day and had to chop its way

through. Don't believe your car can make it anyway. Do you think you'd better try it?"

Fleming stiffened. "Do you want to see me try it, Mr. Albright?" he returned. "We'll leave here at daybreak to-morrow, and there's a seat for you if you want it."

The older man's face brightened perceptibly. "Well, I'd just as soon," he said, trying not to look interested. "But I don't believe you can make it," he added, to keep himself in countenance.

"To-morrow night at this time we'll know more about it," Jerry laughed. "In the meantime let's have supper."

CHAPTER XX

"THIS time to-morrow night" had come. Undoubtedly they all knew very much more about it than when they had discussed the route in Wapinitia the night before. For, instead of covering one hundred miles in a day and a half, as Fleming had planned, and gaining the shelter of the Government camp on Mount Hood for the second night, they had made forty miles and now faced a night in the open.

To add an element of apprehension to the situation there was plainly some sort of storm brewing in the upper air. High up among the great pines and firs there was a sound as of an angry sea; their tops swayed and tossed before the wind until the whole mountainside seemed tremulous with life. The air had grown suddenly cold with a chill not of the hour after sunset. Fleming remembered what the stage driver had said to him that morning as they were leaving. He had leaned against a post with a cynical smile on his weather-beaten face and scoffed openly at the Easterners as they stowed away provisions in the tonneau.

"You-all will be dropping back into town to-morrow mornin'," he grinned. "Why, it'd be a right smart trick fer me to drive an outfit over the Pass at this time 'o the year—an' I c'n drive some, too. The's trees enough across the trail to build a house, an' that storm we had a few days ago has brought up water in the woods till what you'll need is a bridge gang to go ahead of you."

Then he stopped and held up a moistened forefinger to the wind. "The's another storm comin', too. Wind and mebee snow. You take *my* advice an' go down to Portland on the river boats."

But this was, of course, out of the question for Fleming. He had, indeed, tried at the last minute to persuade Betty's father to go back to Portland by way of the river; but Hiram D. was highly indignant at the insinuation that he could not stand the possible hardships before them. He would go on with the car, then, anyway; and the outcome of it was that Fleming had the additional worry of feeling that he was leading Betty's father into unknown dangers.

This feeling was most strongly with him as he listened to the rising of the wind and realized that in half an hour a dark and cold night

would be upon them. All that day they had forded creeks, climbed up and down hill, used their windlass and cable to haul themselves out of gulches washed out across the road, and jacked up the car twice to get it over a boulder in the trail. They had exerted every bit of strength and ingenuity they possessed to make the top of the Pass, but in vain. There was nothing for them now but to prepare to camp where they were.

For himself Jerry would not have minded it if it had been possible to predict what sort of effect roughing it would have on the health and temper of Betty's father. He had had a sample of Hiram D. Albright in an irascible mood, and he did not care to repeat the experiment.

But, curiously enough, Hiram accepted the situation philosophically. Indeed, an almost boyish spirit of adventure seemed to have came to life in the gray-haired business man. He expressed no forebodings as to rheumatism, and he fell to work unloading blankets and cooking utensils as if he had not had twenty years of manual idleness. On account of the high wind they dug a shallow trench for their fire and put the tire irons across it to support the coffee pot.

"We'll cook the coffee first and then the bacon," Sid directed.

He was at that moment head and shoulders in the tonneau, but suddenly he emerged with a groan of horror.

"We've lost the bacon!" he cried—"the whole bloomin' chunk!"

It was a moment before the tragedy of this fact burst upon them, but when they realized it fully, the three of them cast themselves into the tonneau in a despairing search. No use! The bacon had been shaken out somewhere on the rough trail, and with it everything in the food line with the exception of a box of crackers and small can of ground coffee. It was a depressing discovery.

They supped lightly on crackers and coffee —and the next morning they breakfasted frugally on coffee and crackers. But in the meantime they had passed through such an experience as none of them would ever forget.

About midnight there burst upon them one of those inexplicable and violent storms which frequently vent their fury upon the Cascades. They were wakened first by a crash of thunder, and almost immediately the rain was upon them—a deluge of rain which poured down

even through the thick forest as if from a hundred water spouts. The wind rose and lashed the trees until, in fear of falling branches, the three men crawled under the partial shelter of the car, where they lay, wet and uncomfortable, listening to the pounding of the enormous hailstones which were coming down with the rain. As the storm increased in violence they could hear, far up the mountainside, the crash of falling trees. The noise was like far-off artillery, terrifying and sleep-dispelling.

In this manner they spent the rest of the night, most miserably. Sid amused himself by enumerating the things he would like to have for breakfast, until Fleming, goaded by his empty stomach, threatened to pitch him out into the storm if he did not stop. The thought that absorbed Fleming's mind was the question of Vannuccini's whereabouts. If he had gone by Santiam pass had he escaped this storm? While they had been crawling along, sometimes taking hours to make a single mile, what had the Italian car been doing? How far from Portland was it—and what would Betty say if the Superba reached its goal first?

With the first indication of daylight they crawled out and looked about them. The rain had long since ceased, but the havoc of the

storm was everywhere. Not twenty rods from their camp a giant fir lay straight across the trail; in all directions brooks and rivulets that had not been there the night before were rushing down the mountainside. The woods seemed drowned and soaking, pools of water lay where before there had flourished a bed of ferns; there did not seem to be a dry twig left in the forest.

They made their coffee over the flames of the blow-torch and got what sustenance they could out of a box of damp crackers, and then they prepared for what was to be the hardest day's work any of them had ever known.

It did not once occur to Fleming to turn back, though Betty's father declared he was willing to bear witness to the fact that the trail was impossible.

"Nothing is impossible," Jerry returned, setting his lips in the straight line the older man was beginning to recognize. "We have plenty of gasolene; the car is running well, and I'm going on. That's all there is to say."

That day they made nine miles.

In the morning it had been a simple matter of sticking to the trail until they reached a camp; at night it had become a struggle for their very lives. For at noon they had made

their last meal of crackers, and they had not seen a living thing in the forest. The trail grew with every mile more difficult. It had been at best two faint wheel ruts following a devious way among stumps and fallen trees. After the storm it had become nearly obliterated; they might almost as easily have driven a motor car through the unopened forest. Beginning that morning with the fir tree which they had chopped in two sections to get the car through, they had hewn their path through the trunks of six trees, which had fallen across the trail, and had built two sections of corduroy road over a slimy swamp.

When in the middle of the afternoon they stopped with the radiator of the Mountaineer against a pine that stretched its four-foot diameter across their path, Betty's father was a pathetic sight. He had lost his hat somewhere on the way, and Sid had lent him a cap which looked singularly incongruous on his gray head. He was splashed with mud from head to foot; his hands were bruised and blistered, and one of his bushy eyebrows was inky black from a splash of grease. But curiously enough the spirit of what Sid called "a dead game sport" had been aroused in the millionaire manufacturer. He had not uttered one complaint;

he had done his share of the work with a sort of grim enthusiasm, and when they seemed at last to have come to a final impasse, he said:

"Well, Jerry, I guess we can get over that, can't we?"

There was a note of equality and comradeship in the old man's tone that Jerry had never heard there before. It gave him exactly the courage he needed just then. He got up from the log where he had thrown himself exhausted and replied cheerfully:

"Why, of course we can. But it will take six hours to chop through that giant with one ax; we'll just build a runway and drive the car over it."

It is one thing to build roads over a four-foot obstacle when one has had a good breakfast and dinner; but, as Sid said, to do these things when a man is "so everlasting hungry he gets to seeing steaks and hearing dinner bells," is another proposition. By the middle of the afternoon they were desperately hungry. As they forded a branch of the Salmon River Sid declared he saw a trout. With one accord they climbed out of the car on the bank of the stream and watched Sid with bated breath as he patiently angled for that fish. But it was no use, the Oregon fish were too

wily to furnish luncheon for three starving Easterners. They did not respond with as much as a nibble. Sorely disappointed, the three climbed back into their places. Unless a turn of the trail revealed a house or camp within an hour they would have to go supperless to bed on the ground once more.

At six o'clock it is dark in those cathedral-like forest aisles. They struggled on, each one of them determinedly cheerful, until they were obliged to pause at the edge of a green and slimy swamp. Sid in his hip boots waded in and found the water not more than eight inches deep. But half way across the car stuck in the mud. The cable was unwound and run out to a near-by tree. It broke after half a dozen turns of the handle, was spliced and broke again, repeatedly. The night had settled down upon them by the time they got the car on to firm ground. Too exhausted to make a fire and boil their coffee, they rolled up in blankets, Betty's father in the car, Fleming and Sid on the ground, and fell asleep.

It seemed to Fleming that he had no more than closed his eyes when he found himself sitting bolt upright, with a snarling scream ringing in his ears. Sid also jumped to his feet, visibly scared. He had never heard such a

blood-curdling sound in his life, and he was extremely averse to remaining under that particular tree any longer. The call or challenge, or whatever it was, had been answered far off in the forest by the weird wail of a panther; and then, as they became accustomed to the darkness about them, they were aware that in the branches of a tree on the other side of the trail a pair of brilliant, fiery eyes were looking down at them.

After that no persuasion could induce Sid to sleep in the open. In fact, Fleming himself did not relish the thought that the owner of that snarling scream might come dropping down upon him as he slept. They lighted a fire with what half-dry material they could find. Then they rolled two logs parallel to each other, spread their blankets between, threw some smaller logs and saplings over the top, and crawled beneath this shelter.

When morning dawned the three men looked at each other, and each of them knew that another day of violent exertion without food would leave them at the end of their strength that night. Fleming drew his belt up tighter and a look of grim stubbornness came into his face.

"We can't be far below the timber line," he

said: "I don't believe the Government camp is more than twenty miles away. Things can't get any worse, that's certain, and—well, I'm going to stick to the car, anyway."

Another day of hunger and endless struggle seemed before them; but early in the forenoon they came with startling unexpectedness upon a small clearing, and in the midst of it was a house. With a shout of joy Fleming and Sid ran toward it—and then stopped, for the place was absolutely deserted. The gray and weather-stained door sagged open on its hinges; rank weeds grew high about the rotting doorstep. It was a thoroughly depressing sight; but hope died hard in their hearts. Even Mr. Albright joined them in a search from attic to cellar of the dismal place.

But they could find nothing eatable. Their examination of the house proved to them that it must have been abandoned several years before. Mournfully they filed out into the grass-grown dooryard and silently they were preparing to get under way again, when there came to their ears a curious sound. It was faint, far off, but perfectly definite, and each of them knew at once it was the noise a powerful automobile makes when its muffler is off.

The three men looked at each other without

a word. In Fleming's eyes for the first time since he had undertaken the conquest of the Pass, there was the shadow of discouragement. He knew as well as the others that it was Vannuccini behind them, and he realized with bitter chagrin that in the last two days he had been literally building a trail for his rival. The same thought seemed to have occurred to the others, for Sid said with a rueful grin:

"*He* don't have to stop to chop down no trees or build corduroy roads. Just listen to that exhaust! They're coming along at a fair jog, they are!"

"Well, I hope his provisions haven't given out," said Fleming, quietly: but in his inmost heart he was telling himself that he would hold the trail if he had to stand guard over it with his six-shooter.

But there was no need for desperate measures—the Italian had not the slightest desire or intention to take the lead. He overtook them as they were clearing a stump from the trail, and he amiably placed his grub box at their disposal when he learned their plight; but he made it perfectly clear that he preferred the rear of that procession.

"Till we get to good roads," said Sid aside to Fleming.

"If he takes the rear now he's got to keep it," Fleming returned grimly.

Vannuccini told them he had left Wapinitia the day before. He had profited by their labors to the extent of making fifty miles to their ten. It was a galling fact for the road builders to swallow, but they consoled themselves with the immediate blessings of something to eat. It was a meal sadly disproportioned to their appetites, for Vannuccini's grub box was but scantily furnished.

"I could eat that much all over again," Sid remarked, as Fleming made him put back part of the provisions for another meal.

"We don't know how long we'll have to make it last," Fleming said.

But even this scanty lunch put new life into them all. Jerry had been doing some thinking as he ate, and as the rest of them climbed back to their places in the two cars, he turned politely to Vannuccini.

"Perhaps you would like to go ahead?" he said.

"My dear Fleming, not at all! After you!" the Italian replied with a smile which conveyed a variety of meanings.

And "after you" was the keynote of his attitude the rest of the day.

It seemed incredible, but before afternoon one fact had dawned upon them all—Vannuccini did not intend to work.

Fleming had naturally assumed that in the matter of tree-chopping the crews of the two cars would alternate. But he was speedily assured of the futility of expecting help from his rival. Vannuccini was quite willing his mechanic should chop trees; but when Jarvis paused to rest and it was hinted that his employer might take his place, the Italian stared as if astonished at the mere idea. He said, quite amiably, that he had never wielded an ax and he did not intend to learn. Then he climbed into his car, where he sat rolling cigarettes and gazing urbanely upon the toiling, sweating quartette as they removed a six-foot section from the trunk of a giant fir stretched across the trail.

"Well, say—ain't he got an armor-plated nerve?" Sid asked his fellow workers, but he received no response.

Jarvis looked as if he could a tale unfold, but was restrained by the etiquette of the driver and mechanic; Fleming shut his mouth tightly and chopped away; and into the face of Betty's father there came a look of anger repressed to the apoplectic point.

But Hiram said nothing until they had worked along to where a slimy pool stretched across the trail and as far as they could see into the woods on either side.

Fleming had already had too much experience with the sticky mud at the bottom of such pools to try to drive the car through it. There was only one thing to do,—they must build a corduroy road of saplings and such small logs as they could roll into the mud hole. That meant two hours of back-breaking work.

Hiram looked at Vannuccini, who had stopped his car at a discreet distance.

"Say!" he called, trying to make his voice as matter-of-fact as possible, "we've got to corduroy this bit. Get out, will you, and help Jarvis with those saplings."

Possibly the menacing eye of Hiram D. Albright conveyed more meaning than his words. At any rate, Vannuccini descended from his seat. He laid hold of one end of a stout sapling Jarvis had chopped down, dragged it to the pool, looked apprehensively at his hands, and then walked back to the car, settled himself comfortably and went to sleep.

Hiram stared for an enraged minute at the placid figure, and then drew Jarvis one side.

"Say, has he done any work on this trip?" he asked.

Jarvis looked at his master with unconcealed dislike. "It's like this, Mr. Albright. He can work like a devil if he has to, but he'll never do one stroke if he can make somebody else do it for him—see? He's the smartest proposition and the most ornery one I ever run up against. That's giving it to you straight, sir."

Hiram looked long and thoughtfully at the slumbering Italian, then he said:

"Jerry, I want you to beat that cuss."

It would have given Jerry keen satisfaction to know that at last Betty's father wanted him to win but for the apparent hopelessness of the situation. He knew as well as if he had already seen the close of their long struggle across the continent that Vannuccini would beat him on the good roads between Salmon and Portland. The moment they got over the Pass—if they ever did—the Italian would take the road ahead, and he, Jerry, would enter Portland as far behind as there was difference in their horse-power.

Fleming knew he was using all his strength merely to see the other car take the lead when he had hewn and built a road for it out of the

forest. And under the circumstances he was powerless to change the situation. Luck had caught him in a trap from which there was no way out.

As he realized the situation fully, many desperate thoughts came into his mind. Whether he lost or won the race he had no doubt of Betty's attitude, and he was certain Vannuccini must know by this time that his hopes in that direction were in vain; but Fleming knew now that he had to do with an unscrupulous and skillful adversary. He was face to face with the loss of every cent he possessed and a more important loss of prestige for his car.

All during the rest of that toilsome afternoon his thoughts played with distracting anxiety around the one problem: How could he outwit the man behind him? For hours Vannuccini managed to keep just at their heels when there was a bit of straightaway driving, and contrived to be half a mile behind when the trail had to be cleared of some obstruction. Fleming found himself wondering savagely how much longer it would be before he lost control of himself; he said to himself that after he had cleared the way once more he was going to stand up in his car and plug away at Vannuccini's front tires with his six-shooter.

It was some consolation to him that night was coming on. If they had to camp again that night Vannuccini would at least know what it was to go without breakfast—and perhaps without dinner and supper.

"Lord! will we ever get out of these woods?" he groaned aloud as the gleam of water through low branches told him they had come to another swamp.

In the forest depths a somber twilight had already gathered. If they were to get across the swamp before dark they must work rapidly. Fleming and Sid waded through the sedgy outskirts until they reached the center of the swamp, which the recent storm had turned to a pool of unknown depth.

"There isn't more than six inches of water," said Sid, who had gone ahead with a stick; "but the bottom is soft and 'most as sticky as that buffalo wallow we broke into back in Nebraska. It will need a good heavy corduroy for both cars, won't it?"

Fleming suddenly threw back his head and laughed. At the words a great idea, a heaven-sent idea, had come to him. He took his little red-haired mechanic by the arm and said something in his ear. For an instant Sid stared; then a howl of joy broke from him.

He cast both arms around Fleming and like a couple of boys they pounded each other on the back and laughed until the woods rang. It was truly a droll idea that Fleming had got.

"Remember, nothing heavier than branches and brush!" he cautioned Sid, "and be ready to push if I need you."

Sid went on with the road-building, while Fleming carefully adjusted his Weed tire chains. "I don't want to make any mistake in this dash for the pole," he grinned at Sid. Then he set Hiram to work unloading everything that could possibly be carried, to lighten the car. Betty's father looked puzzled. He remarked that it seemed to him they were building a pretty light road.

"It's heavy enough for us!" Jerry laughed. "Now, then, both of you get out of the way; I want plenty of room for this trip."

He backed the car a little to get a running start. Then he speeded up the engine, threw in the clutch and the next minute in one grand splashing spurt the little car had thrashed its way into the center of the swamp, where for an instant it faltered.

"Now, then, push for your life, Sid!" Fleming called.

Sid dashed to the rescue and Hiram followed, inspired by a swift understanding of this maneuver. With their united shoulders to the back of the lightened car they gave one tremendous push which carried it over the danger-spot before the light brush corduroy gave way under the weight of the machine.

"Wait till the big Superba hits that soft spot," said Sid.

They had just finished reloading when Vannuccini drove his car to the edge of the swamp. With entire faith that he could do what from a distance he had just seen Fleming do, he drove cautiously through the outskirts of the swamp and onto the precarious brush road Fleming and Sid had built.

Half way across, without an instant's warning, the big car with two-thirds of its weight in front, sank until the two front wheels had totally disappeared. The road that had been built for a fifteen hundred pound car had given way under the four thousand pounds of the Superba, and in two minutes it was as firmly lodged in the sticky clay of the swamp as if it had been one of the native pines. In every sense of the word the bottom had dropped out of things for Signor Vannuccini!

CHAPTER XXI

A GLORIOUS afternoon; a magnificent stretch of macadam road, with two automobiles following a battered blue car—and Portland just in sight.

"Betty," Fleming said, "will you pinch me, please? I can't believe I'm awake. To think that I am here, and you are there, and in ten minutes we'll pass the city limits. How in the world did you ever think of coming out to meet me, Betty?"

"Why, because I couldn't help but come. I'd have come if I'd had to hire a delivery wagon. When you telephoned in from Salmon this noon that you were within forty miles, I told Mrs. Graham I had to meet you or die! She has the fastest car in Portland, and five minutes after your 'phone message we were whizzing out here! You know, when father declared he was going back to Wapinitia to meet you I went to stay with Mrs. Graham. I think Dad thought I might come tagging after him if he left me at the hotel! And when I saw him coming in with you, I was

speechless. Why, he never told me he was going to come on with you. He said something about lumber interests, and then the first thing I knew he was off. Is he—do you think he has forgiven you, Jerry?"

In view of the last two days' events, her anxious tone both amused and touched him.

"Dear little girl," he said; "your father and I understand each other now. We're going to be regular pals from this time on. Read that, Betty."

He passed over to her a telegram which was signed by his partners, Walters and Cushman. It ran:

"Congratulations. Win or lose, your trip has sold more cars than we can build in a year. Hurry back and help us fill orders. Entire country talking your trip and our car."

"Our local agent met me in Salmon and gave it to me," Fleming explained, "and I couldn't resist showing it to your father. What do you suppose he said, Betty?"

"Offered you a partnership?"

"Right; that's just what he did,—but there's more than that. I thanked him and then I said as solemn as an owl: 'I'm afraid it's out of

the question, sir. I couldn't give up my model, for, you see, I'm perfectly satisfied with this car.' And the old gentleman looked up at me with a twinkle in his eyes. 'What's that? What's that?' he said; 'Who said anything about giving up this model? Perfectly satisfied with it, myself. Ought to be made in a big factory like mine—the American car for American roads.'"

Betty laughed aloud. "Why, they're your very words! I'd like to know what you've done to Dad. But first of all, I want to know what you've done to Vannuccini."

A broad smile began to spread over Jerry's face.

"I saw him last," he said, "at seven o'clock this morning. He was footing it off into the backwoods with a pair of whiffle-trees over his shoulders, while Jarvis drove a team of horses intended to be used in dragging the proud Superba out of a mud hole."

Betty's eyes were of a saucer-like roundness with curiosity. "How did he get into a mud hole? Where is he now? When did he—oh, begin at the beginning and tell it *all!*"

There was not time to tell it all, then and there. But Jerry hastily sketched for her their three days' struggle over Mount Hood. He

told of that last bit of road-building, which had proved Vannuccini's undoing, and of their being obliged to take the two men on with them, when it was found the Superba could not possibly be extricated without horses.

"Couldn't leave them there in the woods, when we didn't know how far from help we were," he said. "So they got in. We'd made perhaps six miles and were resigning ourselves to camping for the night, when we heard a dog bark. Betty, I don't believe anything will ever give me the wild and hilarious joy I felt when I heard that dog. Sid said, anyway, if there wasn't a house we could eat the dog. We crawled up the trail a mile farther, and there was the Government camp. You can't imagine how queer it is to wander for three days through the wilderness and then come out suddenly upon a neat, prosperous little white house, with green blinds and posy beds!"

"But the people must have been as surprised as you were!" Betty exclaimed.

"Surprised! If we had dropped from the clouds they couldn't have been more astonished. They wouldn't believe we had made the pass in the car till we had proved it by describing the trail. And then Mrs. Yoakum cooked

us a supper that none of us will forget right away. Betty, I wish you could have seen your father eat! We had to forcibly restrain him from the biscuit and honey. Think of biscuit and honey after three days of coffee and nothing else in particular! We ate until it was a physical impossibility to eat any more, and then we sat and looked at the food that was left on the table. Before we went to bed we ate again, and next morning—well, you ask your father how many buckwheat cakes he caused to vanish!"

"And the Signor—was his appetite good? Do you think he realized he was beaten then?"

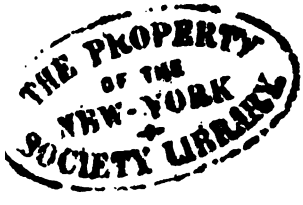
"Oh, he knew it was all up with him when Yoakum refused to let his team go till morning. He was wild. I think he would have gone back to the car and worked in the dark if he could have got a team. But even Jarvis went back on him. He told Vannuccini it was his own fault that the car was stuck, and the Italian got into a rare old rage. You see, Betty, it was a tough situation for him. He had lost the race, and lost it through his own laziness, and he knew that we all knew it. He isn't a fool, and he is no incompetent. Even Jarvis admitted that he could work like a demon, if he had to, but——"

"There," said Betty, "we've had enough Vannuccini. He's out of our lives now, and we'll forget him. Oh, look! There's the city limit post. Stop the car and let the others catch up. I'd like the whole world to know you've won!"

They stood up in the car and turned their backs to the setting sun, as they waited for the two cars with Mrs. Graham and Betty's father, Sid and Fleming's local agent with his friends to overtake them. As their hands met, there was a light in their two faces which was not of the sun.

"Have I made good, Betty?" he asked her softly.

She only nodded; but in her eyes there was a glorious look of pride and happiness and belief.



THE END

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